

Kuro no Maou

– The Black Demon King –

- Volume 18 -

Army of Laziness

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CHAPTER 319

THE WHITE WINGS' PROLOGUE

I have realized that Kurono-kun is no good unless I am by his side.

I know that Kurono-kun is a strong, handsome, kind, wonderful man.

At the Academy, everyone speaks badly of him, but I know the true Kurono-kun. Only I know. It is fine that others don't know; in fact, it is better off that way.

But Kurono-kun is no good, after all –

“Sorry about this Nell, I hurt myself pretty badly...”

He pushes himself incredibly hard.

You can't do that, please stop, it's dangerous, please don't fight dangerous opponents like someone who possesses the Hydra family's Demon Eyes.

That's why, I mean, because I didn't stop him, Kurono-kun's right arm is – I'm scared, what if it happens again?

If Kurono pushes himself again, somewhere out of my sight, somewhere my hands won't reach, then next time for sure...

I was anxious, just so anxious, that's why I couldn't separate my hands, my arms, my body, from the right arm that I healed.

Even though I finished treating him long ago, I even told the lie that he still needed more healing.

I can't bear it, this anxiousness, this fear of Kurono throwing himself into a dangerous fight again all by himself.

He will never stop fighting. It's not because he's an adventurer.

“There are some guys that I need to kill, no matter what.”

There is a concrete purpose that he cannot give up, though he wouldn't tell me what it was.

He definitely has determination and won't change his mind no matter what I say – no matter what anyone says.

Therefore, I have come to this decision.

If Kurono-kun continues to push himself, I just have to be there to help him.

“... Kurono-kun.”

We're sitting on a bed in the Grand Coliseum's infirmary, with our bodies close together.

If I want to say it, there's no other time to say it but now.

“You know, I –”

I will become your partner, Kurono-kun.

Not your party member, but your partner. That is what pairs of adventurers who work together call each other.

It seems you belong to a party known as the [Element Masters] , but party members who would abandon Kurono-kun to conduct their own activities do not amount to much.

I'm sure they only trust each other as much as a temporary party, anyway.

That's why I'll become your partner.

I'll quit Wing Road.

I don't have any regrets. That is not where I belong; it is merely somewhere I was “allowed to be”.

Onii-sama protected me; Sharl was worried for me; Kai-san and Safi-san took care of me.

That's why I'll be fine now.

From now on, I'll fight for the person that truly needs me.

I'll devote myself to Kurono-kun.

I'm Kurono-kun's number one.

CHAPTER 320

BAD PERSON

“The open-field exercise was cancelled due to a Rank 5 monster attack.”

The person who interrupted Nell’s confession of a lifetime delivers an emergency report that Nell has to admit is important enough to interrupt it.

The light, happy feeling that filled Nell’s head until just moments earlier, similar to the drunkenness she once experienced after accidentally drinking alcohol, has already vanished like mist.

Even so, she is still obstinately snuggling against Kurono’s right arm.

“What do you mean?”

“Full details are written here.”

Of course, from her current position, Nell is able to read the quest form that was handed to Kurono as he reads it himself.

“As you can see, Iskia Fortress is currently in a state of crisis. Prince Wilhart has royally requested that you accept this emergency quest, Kurono-sama.”

This shocking information is more than enough to surprise Nell.

Nell’s head is clear enough to realize that a request for aid has probably already been formally made to the Knights’ Order and Adventurers’ Guild as well.

If this information is accurate, the enemy is a Rank 5 monster leading an army of countless monsters.

Even if Wing Road is there, it is not a situation that they can overcome with just the four of them.

Even if this Greed-Gore were only as powerful as the Wrath-Pun that they defeated before, with other monsters assisting it, it would probably be impossible to defeat it

even if Nell returned to reform the full party.

No, it is much simpler than that.

(Even Wing Road, even Onii-sama can't defeat it...)

Nell is aware of just how much of a problematic situation this is.

However, what she should have felt right after this realization, the worry for her older brother, her best friend, her party members –

“It is an unofficial quest that has not yet been approved by the guild, but may I ask you to accept it?”

“Of course! I'm heading there right now, so you better be alive and waiting for me, Will, Simon!”

Her own feelings are washed away by the torrent of emotions transmitted from Kurono via her telepathy.

Nell was born with telepathy, but she cannot read a person's emotion well without direct contact. Her telepathy's effectiveness pales in comparison to the Characteristic Ability of Fairies and such.

However, Kurono's arm is currently in her firm grasp. He is experiencing great emotions, and Nell is able to see the large amount of information that comes with it.

Not only is she able to feel his emotions, but she sees clear pictures that allow her to catch a glimpse of the memories related to it.

In other words, Nell sees *that*.

(Th-this is...)

It is too vivid and too violent; all of Nell's consciousness is drawn to it, making her forget about her other concerns.

(– Kurono-kun's trauma.)

This is perhaps some rural village.

There are lines of wooden houses, and among them is a three-story building that stands out. This building seems to be the Adventurers' Guild serving this desolate place.

If there were people walking about beneath clear blue skies with farming tools in their hands, this would be a peaceful, quiet scene that could be witnessed anywhere on the continent of Pandora.

However, Nell's vision is filled with the red color of raging flames.

The village is burning.

"Shit... Damn it..."

She can hear Kurono's voice.

But she cannot see him. This is Kurono's memory, so the image that she sees is from his point of view. Unless there is a mirror somewhere, she would not be able to see him.

Nell is looking upon this scene through Kurono's eyes.

"I couldn't protect this village, I couldn't protect my friends..."

Could this village that is being consumed by the blazing, merciless flames be Kurono's home?

In front of his eyes are crosses upon which people have been crucified. Just how serious are the crimes that these people have committed?

There is not just one, but many of them, lined up like gravestones.

As if being offered as sacrifices to an evil god by a terrible witch, the crucified people are engulfed in roaring flames.

The figures of the crucified people are hidden behind the crimson fire, but the one at the very front, a young, female cat-person*, is visible.

<TLN*: Previously translated as cat beastman which is technically literally correct, but sounds absolutely terrible.>

She and the others that are burning on the crosses behind her are surely Kurono's friends.

(Th-this is terrible... S-such a thing...)

Though Nell is a princess, she is also a Rank 5 adventurer; she is used to seeing people die.

While gruesome corpses that have been partially eaten by monsters are not pleasant to see, she can look at them directly without having to avert her eyes.

However, this scene is not some disaster that has been caused by a monster's behavioral instincts.

This complete massacre and destruction is the work of humans, a result of their evil intent.

(... War.)

Cruel, atrocious, tragic – there are countless words to describe the scene. For the first time in her life, Nell is witnessing the absolute worst of what humans are capable of doing to each other, though she is doing so through someone else's eyes.

At the same time, she understands that this is the reason that Kurono harbors a desire for revenge in the depths of his heart.

However, this is only half-correct.

“This... this is too much... Everyone's dead...”

As Kurono weeps and murmurs these grim words, the surrounding flames suddenly billow upwards as if in a storm, forcing him to close his eyes.

But before Nell can feel the heat, her vision clears up.

The scene has changed, and now she is standing on a highway somewhere.

The outlines of mountains in the distance are the Galahad mountain range, perhaps.

If that is the case, this is unlikely to be some foreign land far from Spada.

The sun is setting, and the sky's surface is a bright red.

The ground beneath her feet, as if mirroring the sky, is also a deep crimson color.

(Eh, that's, this is -)

"Shit! Damn it! Was I not able to protect anyone this time, either...?"

The freshly spilled blood dying the road red is a sign of the horrible manner in which the bodies have been destroyed.

There is not a single intact corpse.

Three headless female archers are lying side-by-side.

There are bodies whose skeletons have been pulverized, leaving only their black robes in one piece.

The cracked red orbs rolling around on the ground are likely to be Slime cores.

And in front of Kurono's eyes, there is a large Wolf-man with a large sword piercing his chest who has been crucified against the ground's surface.

As Kurono stands amidst this carnage, he whispers, as if coming to a realization.

"I see, it's my fault... that everyone is dead."

The feeling of despair that Kurono felt that day pierces Nell's heart.

(It's not your fault, Kurono-kun! You did nothing wrong, nothing wrong at all!)

As Kurono's feelings flow into her, Nell's shouts go unheard in this memory of his that she is seeing.

Since she is seeing only a tiny part of his memory, she does not know the circumstances that led to Kurono arriving at the scene of this bloodbath.

Even so, she cannot hold herself back from shouting, from denying his own words to himself.

How could Kurono, who has been thrown to the very bottom of a pit of despair, look upon this sight in silence?

Whether it is out of compassion, pity or hypocrisy, it does not matter. It does not matter at all; she needs to help Kurono, she needs to console him – she feels a maddening urge to do so.

(Ah, stop, please stop, please don't blame yourself like that... You did your best after all, didn't you, Kurono-kun? I haven't seen it, but I know you have. You've done your best, you fought the enemies desperately, didn't you? Isn't that enough? You don't have to suffer so much. It's not your fault, Kurono-kun, Kurono-kun is –)

“How can you tell yourself that? “

As if in response to her thoughts, Kurono denies them.

Is it a coincidence? No, there is no doubt that Kurono had the exact same thoughts back then.

He had those thoughts, but in the end, he spat out words to deny them.

(No, you can't... You can't do that... If you do that, you'll suffer, you'll be hurt... That's just too much!)

But it is a memory after all; there is no way that Nell's feelings will affect events that have already happened at some unknown time in the past.

Even though she knows this, she cannot help but to pray for him.

To pray for the wretched, defeated Kurono to be saved.

“I couldn't... protect anyone.”

“That's not true. You saved me, didn't you?”

And sure enough, words of salvation are spoken to Kurono.

Before Nell realizes it, the scenery has changed once more.

It is still evening, but the sky that is visible from here is thin and narrow.

It seems that this place is a dark, dirty, small alleyway in a slum.

And the one extending a hand to save Kurono, who appears as if he might be crushed by his despair at any moment, is –

(Eh, who is that child?)

There is a child with the black hair and red eyes that should only be possessed by those with the blood of the old Demon King, Mia Elroad.

In the present day, the only person who should have these features is her older brother, Nero.

But it can be said with complete certainty that the child before Kurono's eyes is not Nero.

Even if Nero somehow regressed his age to that of this child, his features would not resemble the child's at all. Nell has spent her childhood with him, and when she compares the child with the image of Nero from her memories, she is completely sure that this is the case.

This young child, whose neutral features make it impossible to tell whether they are a boy or a girl, smiles gently and continues to speak.

“But you know, you came to save me, a complete stranger that you had never met before, without even thinking of abandoning me. You did the right thing; nobody can deny that, so you won't lose your way anymore. This time, you should be able to save everyone.”

Nell does not know what kind of history there is between Kurono and this strange child.

“Thanks.”

But she knows from the single word that Kurono spoke that he was able to escape from the depths of despair that day.

And so, Kurono became the Kurono that he is today.

The Kurono who looks forward and earnestly pushes onward, showing no signs of his

tragic past.

As Nell comes to this understanding –

“Well then, I will give you my divine protection – but before that, fufu. To be peeking at other people’s memories, my descendants do some bad things, don’t they?”

(... Eh?)

In the middle of this memory, the mysterious child speaks these words.

The child is gazing directly at Kurono with his shining, deep crimson eyes.

Yes, in this memory, the child is supposed to be looking at the Kurono of the past.

(Eh, that’s, this can’t be... This child can see me?!)

Nell feels a chill of fear.

This is strange, impossible, there is no way this can happen. This is nothing more than a reconstructed memory.

The telepathy user watching it is like a visitor at an art gallery, looking at a painting on display.

Just how has the artist become aware of a person who will come to view his art in the future?

Theoretically, this is an unquestionably impossible, incomprehensible, bizarre phenomenon. There is no way this can be happening.

“Nell Julius Elroad, I’ll have to ask you to forget the part that you saw here.”

But it seems that this is, beyond a doubt, reality.

(Who are you?! Why are you inside Kurono-kun’s –)

The deep crimson eyes of the mysterious - no, ominous child before Kurono begin to flicker.

“It is too early for you to know. Goodbye.”

Nell’s consciousness is forcefully suppressed –

“– Nell, get a hold of yourself.”

“Ah, yes, Kurono-kun?”

As Nell comes to her senses, she realizes that she has returned from the swirl of memories, back to reality.

Just a moment earlier, she saw red –

(Red... what was it again?)

In front of her now is Kurono’s face, which possesses eyes with strangely different colors, one black and one red.

She was in a dreamy state of mind because of the telepathy, but she now realizes that she is still clinging to Kurono’s right arm.

Not that she has any intention of letting go now that she has become aware of it.

“My arm is fine already, so you can let go of it now.”

Though disappointed, Nell loosens her fingers.

Slowly but surely, Kurono’s arm is released from Nell’s grip.

Nell is reluctant to let go, but as Kurono separates his arm from her of his own will, she has no choice.

And there are other things she should be worrying about.

“Umm, Kurono-kun.”

As Kurono stands up from the bed, Nell pulls on the still-intact left sleeve of his black coat to stop him.

“You’re going out to help them, aren’t you?”

“Yeah.”

Where he is going, who he wants to save, how he is going to do it – none of this needs to be said. Kurono gives her a simple answer backed by his strong will.

“I will go with you.”

Nell’s words have the same determination.

(I will become your strength, Kurono-kun. We’re going to be partners from now on, after all... Ufufu.)

Nell is not going to the battlefield for the sake of her brother, her best friend, her party members and certain not for the three hundred other academy students whose names she does not even know.

She will fight for only one person, for Kurono.

(I won’t let Kurono-kun be alone anymore, I will be with him, forever by his side.)

Though it was brief, Nell saw Kurono’s tragic past with her own eyes.

Are the feelings in her heart simply those of compassion?

Even she does not know the answer to that. But she knows for certain that she cannot leave Kurono alone, not after he has lost two close friends. Not after he has lost his companions.

Through inadvertently witnessing Kurono’s trauma, her understanding of him and her feelings towards him have deepened.

They have, without a doubt, reached the point of no return.

(Kurono is someone who is going to push himself too far if he’s alone, so I’ll take care of him. Fufu, no matter how hard you push himself, I’ll definitely heal you back up, Kurono-kun~)

The black Nightmare Berserker, standing atop a mountain of countless bloodied monster corpses, with a white-winged princess close to his side – Nell imagines such a world where there are only the two of them.



“I will go with you.”

Nell, who has grabbed a hold of the left sleeve of Diablo’s Embrace, says this with a brave look, as if she’s come to a firm decision.

“No way, it’s too dangerous.”

I reply immediately. It’s only natural; even if Nell is a Rank 5 adventurer, I can’t drag her into danger with me so carelessly.

Well, she’s an amazing user of healing magic, so it would be reassuring if she came with me. But that would be too selfish for me to ask of her.

So I clearly rejected her, but.

“No, I will definitely be going with you. Just as you are going to save your friends, there is someone I must save as well.”

And now I realize just how foolish I am.

“Is Wing Road there?”

This is a foolish question.

Nell nods in response.

Her older brother and her best friend. I once heard from Will that she has been best friends with Charlotte-chan since they were young. In short, people who are this important to her are in a desperate situation, trapped inside Iskia Fortress.

I’m not the only one who is impatient to get there and save them as soon as possible.

There’s no way that the kind Nell would sit quietly and wait while her family member and friends are in danger.

She has her own strength. If she were the type who’d sit and do nothing just because it’ll be dangerous to fight, she wouldn’t be an adventurer. On top of that, she’s Rank 5, something that I can’t even be compared to.

How could I even think of telling Nell to stay here in Spada and wait?

“Sorry, Nell, please come with me – I mean, will you please lend me your strength?”

Yes, this is the request that I should be making.

I don’t want to lose my precious friends ever again.

Just as Mia told me in the dark alleyway in Spada that day, I’ll save my friends this time.

I will do so using any means necessary.

As if she doesn’t know about my egoistic thoughts – no, as if she knows but accepts them – Nell answers with her usual angelic smile.

“Yes, Kurono-kun!”

In the end, I feel like I’m being spoiled by her kindness. I wonder if I’m a bad person after all.

Seria is watching our conversation silently, but her gaze seems a little cold somehow. I wonder if it’s just my imagination...

CHAPTER 321

MERRY RUNS

“We’re going to get through the main gates in one movement, hold tight, Nell!”

“Yes, Kurono-kun!”

Merry, my beloved pitch-black horse, hurtles down Spada’s main road with incredible vigor and flies out through the enormous main gates.

I can hear the guards shouting something at us, but I’ve got the princess riding behind me, so it’s probably fine to ignore them.

Well, as long as I haven’t been mistaken as a kidnapper... But I probably shouldn’t be thinking about that when I’m in such a hurry.

After we eventually get out of the crowded city of Spada, I change our course to the wide, well-maintained highway. From this point, I can have Merry truly fly at full speed.

With the feeling of a driver finally getting out of a packed street onto a motorway, I whip Merry to accelerate.

“You must run for goshuujin-sama’s sake!”

Incidentally, I’m using the tentacles of “Black Hair Curse [Coffin]” as reins.

I get the feeling that I heard the maid’s violent voice, but in any case, Merry lets out a spirited neigh and her powerful legs pick up the pace.

But this isn’t the only thing that speeds her up.

“Well then, Nell, I’ll leave it to you.”

“Yes!”

Nell is riding behind me like Fiona did during our date.

I can feel her soft, warm body against my back, although right now, I feel not only that happy and embarrassing sensation, but –

“أُسرع لـ تشغـ يل الـ قدم سرعة خلال من يـ عمل”

With the elegant melody of her chant that sounds as if she’s singing, the thick presence of her magical power envelops me – no, envelops Merry and I.

“– Speed High-Boost.”

Merry’s speed doubles, showing the effects of Nell’s completed spell.

“... Amazing.”

I whisper without thinking, but I’m breaking out in a cold sweat at this increase in speed that has exceeded my expectations. Marie is just as fast as Merry, but if they were to race now, Merry would win easily.

I wonder how many kilometers per hour we’re doing, but unfortunately there’s no speedometer installed on the body of a horse, so from this sensation I can only say that we’re going “fast.”

Merry was running almost at full speed when we were on the main road, but even so, because I’m quite used to riding horses at this point, I had the composure and technique to be able to avoid running any pedestrians over.

However at the speed we’re traveling at now, going straight is the only option; I don’t have the confidence to be able to pull off any detailed maneuvers. In other words, if we had gone at this speed through the city, my class would definitely have changed to hit-and-runner.

Having Nell wait to use her speed boost until we were out on the highway was a good choice after all, no matter how much of a hurry we’re in.

“Fufu, thank you.”

That’s her reply to my comment that this is amazing. Nell whispers it into my ear with a slightly happy tone.

I feel a momentary chill run down my spine; she’s so close, to the point that I can feel

her breathing.

But since we're riding a horse running at this incredible speed, it's only natural that she's clinging onto me.

My black coat smells of blood slightly since I fought for my life at the Grand Coliseum not too long ago, and yet due to the danger of falling off the horse, there's no other option but for Nell to just endure it and hold on tight.

That's why I feel guilty that I'm feeling chills and my heart is beating fast, even though I'm supposed to be the one in charge of the horse. I'm really sorry, but this is the normal physiological reaction of any man.

My feelings of guilt intensify as I think about how pure Nell is despite the fact that she's not a Fairy like Lily.

"No, I should be the one thanking you. At this rate, we'll be able to reach Iskia Fortress way faster than I'd expected."

Shaking off my inappropriate feelings, I gave her a serious response.

Nell is of the priest class, which means her specialty is not only healing, as she demonstrated on my right arm, but also supporting allies through enhancement spells.

And her Rank 5 title isn't just for show. Nell is demonstrating right now that her enhancement spells are just as powerful as her healing.

The [Speed High-Boost] she cast is an intermediate-level enhancement spell, but I feel like it's been executed at a level above that, so I think it's exhibiting the effects of a high-level spell.

The same spell can have very different results depending on the skill of the caster. It's the same as when Fiona uses her offensive spells.

Well, in Fiona's case, it's more like a spontaneous discharge of her excess magical power while for Nell, her accurate control over her magical power and elaborate spell formula is what produces a perfected spell. So it's actually quite different.

"We'll arrive within three – no, two days, I guess."

“I’m sorry. You might have been able to get there faster if you were alone, Kurono-kun.”

Nell apologizes, and at the same time, for some reason, I get the feeling that her arms have tightened their grip around my waist.

“It’s true that I could have gone without sleep or rest if I were alone, but –”

My body has the endurance and stamina to go a week without eating or drinking. I wonder just how hard those masked guys were planning to have me work; I feel the urge to murder them rise up... Well, I’ll let it go for now.

“– Either way, Merry would need to rest, so I’m sure it’s much faster with you and your enhancement magic, Nell.”

“But I’m... well, heavy, so...”

What’s with that girly line?

I feel like an idiot for answering seriously. But she’s cute, so I have no choice but to forgive her.

“You’re not heavy enough to have to pay any attention to your weight.”

Lily, being a Fairy, doesn’t even need to be mentioned, but comparing Nell to Fiona, her figure is more... you know, glamorous; she definitely exceeds the standards of an average seventeen-year-old girl in Spada. Including the big wings on her back.

But I can’t say that. I can at least tell that that would be like stepping on an extra-large land mine.

“Yes... Since you said that, Kurono-kun, I won’t worry about it.”

Nell sounds a little happy; it seems I chose my reply well.

I feel her arms tightening around my waist again, but I’m sure it’s not because she’s secretly angry at me or anything.

She’s clinging onto me awfully tightly, but we are traveling quite fast, so it’s dangerous if she doesn’t, I suppose.

I feel bad for Nell, but we can't slow down here. We'll go at full speed like this until we get to Iskia!



"Mmm... Kurono-kun... Ufufu."

It seems that Nell is looking after me, even in her dreams. Seriously, I'm no match for the devoted kindness of a princess.

If she weren't here, I'd still be going down the highway with bloodshot eyes.

Not only that. Nell wields "magic" that will be effective against the army of monsters. Our strength in battle is much greater than if I had come alone.

"You ran well too, so thanks."

Merry is sleeping as well.

Nell applied not only the speed enhancing magic but also fatigue recovery and load-lightening magic, so the journey isn't taking too much of a toll on Merry.

If I was alone, I wouldn't let Merry rest enough and she probably would have collapsed.

That's how much I'm lacking composure right now.

"It's alright, I'll definitely make it in time... This time, for sure..."

Exactly one day has passed since we left Spada. It's now the evening of the 27th of the Month of Platinum (Hakkin).

We've been riding almost all day and all night, and as a result, we're about halfway to Iskia Village.

If we keep this pace up, we'll arrive there in two more days, just as planned.

We're completely ignoring the villages in between. Of course, we're not resting in an inn right now; we're camping outdoors in one of the thick forests that grow on both sides of the highway.

Merry is sleeping with her tired legs folded up under her, and Nell is leaning against Merry's large body wrapped in a blanket, breathing quietly and occasionally mumbling sweet things in her sleep.

Of course, it's my job to keep watch over them. At the same time, I'm using this resting time to make sure my equipment is all in order.

The right sleeve of [Diablo's Embrace] is still torn; it's going to need some more time to regenerate.

It wouldn't look cool to go out to fight with my arm exposed, and I went out of my way to buy full-body armor to use in the fight against the Greed-Gore, so I've decided to wear that.

Though the crucial torso portion of it was left at the Stratos Smithing Workshop to repair the hole made by Ludora, so I'm not exactly fully equipped.

I've got a gauntlet not only for my right arm where my sleeve is missing, but also my left. I've equipped leg-guards on both of my legs as well, so my limbs are now protected.

Now that I have [Diablo's Embrace], a high-level magical robe, I'm more mobile equipping armor on only my limbs rather than the whole suit of armor, so this should be better for my overall combat performance.

This combination of equipment is probably the best I have available to me right now.

"There's still a long time before the sun rises, huh."

I did have to fight for my life during the [Curse Carnival], so it's not like I'm not feeling tired at all.

But in any case, we'll arrive at Iskia Fortress by the day after tomorrow, and we'll save Simon, Will and all the other academy students. I can sleep after I'm done with all of that.

I tell myself that, but in the end, there's still a sense of unease lingering at the bottom of my heart.

I won't make it in time, I'll be too late – no, in the first place, will the Greed-Gore and

its monster army be defeated just because I join the fight?

Lily and Fiona, my reliable companions, are not here right now.

Even my plan of defeating the Greed-Gore is a plan that I made based on the assumption that I would have those two with me. If I go to fight by myself, I have no options but to face it head-on...

Sitting here and thinking quietly like this, my uneasiness just keeps increasing.

“Even if that’s the case, even if I’m alone, I’ll make it happen. This is supposed to be my trial, right, Demon King Mia-chan?”

For the Greed-Gore to appear at this time where I don’t have my party members with me. It’s only natural for me to suspect that this is a god’s will.

Is this the trial that has been prepared for me by the Demon King? Or is this just a natural event caused by a series of coincidences? Either way, there’s no doubt that there’s a trial waiting for me with a second divine protection at the end of it.

The proof of that is that the crimson eye that was given to me by a god is glowing red.

CHAPTER 322

THE PROTECTORS OF ISKIA VILLAGE

We left again at dawn and arrived in Iskia Village the following evening, on the 28th of the Month of Platinum (Hakkin).

“The fighting seems to have died down.”

“You’re right.”

I heard from Seria that Iskia Village was also under attack from the monster army.

I thought that we might need to fight our way into the village, but fortunately we didn’t encounter even a single monster, so we managed to enter the village safely through its eastern gate.

By the fact that the monsters came from the Iskia Hills, I thought that the main stage of the battle would be at the western gate on the other side, but the monsters had apparently surrounded the village so we even saw traces of battle at the eastern gate.

Among the corpses rolling around on the ground are Centaurs and Goblins; there are even some Pegasuses with broken wings. It really was an invasion by a great variety of monsters.

The fact that I don’t see any dead people is probably not because there haven’t been any casualties, but because they’ve already been recovered.

The face of the knight of Spada in red armor that came out to greet Nell and I shows clear signs of fatigue and grief.

The vigilante corps and adventurer group are wearing similar expressions.

In response to this scene that forcefully reminds me of the events of Alzas Village, my heart throbs with unease once more.

“Kurono-kun.”

As if sensing my emotions, Nell calls out to me with a worried voice.

“I’m fine. More importantly, it seems impossible to send out a rescue team from the village.”

I head straight along the central road of the village, from the western gate towards the eastern gate.

As far as I can tell, there aren’t enough spare personnel to put a rescue team together.

They haven’t let any monsters inside, but seeing the people running around, busy with things like treating the wounded and repairing the stone walls even though it’s the middle of the night, I don’t need to ask to know that the people here have their hands full just defending the village.

The worst thing about this situation is that the villagers haven’t been evacuated.

When I passed through the center of the village, I saw unarmed women, children and the elderly. It seems they’ve taken shelter in the larger buildings, with the Adventurer’s Guild in the center of them.

Either they were already surrounded with the first attack, or the monsters appeared on the highway that they would have used to escape.

The option of running away was eliminated before they even realized; they had no choice left but to hole themselves up in the village.

For the situation in the village to be this bad as well; if I didn’t have to go to Iskia Fortress, I’d want to join their defense, but –

“Oi! You, you’re Kurono, aren’t you? What the hell are you doing here?”

A person’s silhouette suddenly jumps out in front of Merry.

It’s a plump man wearing dirty leather armor.

That face, no, if I had to say, that hostile tone, is very familiar.

“You, if I’m not mistaken, you were Kuar Village’s...”

“You bastard, don’t you say the name of that village!”

It’s the self-appointed leader of Kuar Village; his name was Nachim, if I recall.

I guess it’s been this way since we met in the slums of Spada, but it seems he still resents me. Well, it’s to be expected.

Just like me – no, even more than me, he’s lost everything.

“Are you fucking kidding me, showing up in a place like this? Come to destroy another village, you pest?”

Pest, huh. It’s exactly as he says.

The fact that I’m attempting to overcome a trial for a god’s divine protection is of no concern to Nachim. From his point of view, I’m a criminal who leads villagers to their deaths no matter where I go.

And I can’t deny that; I mustn’t.

I have no choice to but to keep my mouth shut and sit here, listening to his tirade without objecting –

“Please stand aside.”

For a moment, I didn’t know whose voice that was.

But the fact that it came from right behind me means that there’s only one person this voice could belong to.

“... Nell?”

When I twist around, I see Nell, whose face always wears a gentle expression. But right now that face is cold and has no expression at all.

In her hand is the [Scale of White Wings] that she used to heal my arm before, pointing at Nachim as if she were thrusting the tip of a sword at him.

“I am the first princess of Avalon, Nell Julius Elroad of the Rank 5 party [Wing Road.] I will forgive your insolence towards my companion only once, but there will not be a

second time. Please stand aside, and never appear before us again.”

What an unbelievably cold tone of voice. No, I heard Nell’s voice like this only a few days ago.

[I’m telling you to stand down, aren’t I? I’ll have you executed for treason!]

I clearly remember the threat of execution directed towards that noblewoman called Christina from Avalon.

And just like that time, her words are immediately effective.

“Kuh... I-I humbly apologize...”

He probably knew Nell’s identity even before she introduced herself. Nachim lowers his head immediately as he reluctantly apologizes.

I guess this is the power of authority – no, Nell is probably displaying this uncharacteristic behavior because of me.

From her point of view, it might look like I’m being blamed unfairly, but that’s not true. Nachim’s words have some truth to them.

What should I say? No, is it better not to say anything in this situation? As if to drown out my hesitation, –

GOOOOHN!

The toll of a bell echoes out.

“Monsters are coming!”

Before I have time to ask what the bell means, someone shouts an answer to my question.

The details are unclear, but it seems that Nachim is involved in the defense. He quickly turns around and leaves.

He turns and shoots me a reproachful glare, but this isn’t a peaceful situation where I can afford to feel upset about it.

“We’re going to have to break through the enemy.”

“It will be alright, because I will protect you, Kurono-kun.”

“That’s reassuring.”

That’s right, this isn’t the time to be mourning what happened in the past. I just have to press on with the determination to save my friends!



Five days have already passed since the defensive battle to hold Iskia Village began on the 22nd of the Month of Platinum (Hakkin). The great army that seemed to be made of every single monster that lives in the dungeon, however, did not swallow the village in one go like a tsunami, but instead came in repetitive, sporadic waves.

Repeatedly throwing forces at the enemy is the worst strategy possible, but even so, the vigilante corps and the adventurers defending the village have had their strength exhausted and have been forced to make sacrifices.

“Just a little longer! If we hold just a little longer, the Knights’ Order will come! Give ‘em all you’ve got!”

Standing in front of the west gate that the new monsters are approaching, Gustav, the leader of the Rank 5 party, the [Iron Demon Brigade], shouts words of encouragement.

The morale of the soldiers protecting Iskia Village is being maintained by the presence of this Orc, whose body size matches the volume of his voice.

As expected of the great man who has gathered a large, family-like party, he seems accustomed to being in command like this.

He has a magnificent attitude, the ability to read any situation quickly, gives orders efficiently and on top of that, he is overwhelmingly strong in battle.

There is not a single soldier who disobeys him, who does not rely on him.

“Zedra, how are them monsters organized?”

Holding the enormous metal rod in his right hand that he has used to thoroughly crush

countless monster skulls, Gustav asks his party member standing on the tower this question.

“Dagger Raptors at the front. Centaurs and Slimes at the back. Also, a group of Harpies in the air.”

Zedra, the Golem covered in two-toned, black-and-white armor, replies in his usual robotic speech pattern.

The Golem’s red Mono-Eye Lens can clearly see the group of monsters approaching from beyond the highway.

In his left hand is a huge mechanical bow with a pulley-like mechanism attached at both ends of the bowstring.

On his back is a large quiver, which would be more accurate to call a barrel, packed full of arrows made of a Mythril alloy. A direct hit with one of these would cause instant death.

The sturdy tower supporting the immense weight of his body and weapon looks like it may collapse at any moment, but the fact that it has not yet done so means that it seems that it has not reached its weight limit.

“What about the Salamander?”

“I cannot detect its presence.”

At the news of the absence of the fiery dragon that they need to be the most wary of, relief spreads out among the men.

With that said, no matter how many torches they launch into the air to illuminate the surroundings, they would not be able to see it in this darkness until it was quite close. They cannot let their guard down.

But it would also be problematic to be overly cautious of a foe that they cannot see, so Gustav gives the order to attack.

“Alright, if that’s the case, let’s get out there and give ‘em a bit of a beating! Open the gate!”

The heavy wooden gate normally requires several people to operate the pulleys to open it or close it, but right now it's being opened by only two people.

"Jeez! Don't make a maiden do only this kind of manual labor! FUNNNNAAAAAAAH!"

"H-here we go, NNNNNHHH!"

This work was being performed by Gustav's party members who are standing next to him at the front, the Minotaur (♂) and Cyclops.

The gates begin to open with a dull creak.

The Swordsman and Fighter-class soldiers who are to face the monsters head on begin to advance forward.

Gustav suddenly spots an unfamiliar silhouette among them.

No, it's only natural that this silhouette stands out to him. The man dressed in black sitting atop a black horse like one that commissioned officers would ride and the angel riding behind him are ridiculously conspicuous.

"Oi, black nii-chan over there, it's the first time I'm seeing yer face. Are you one of the adventurers who've come to help us?"

The news that Iskia Village is in a state of emergency has already been spread to the neighboring villages.

It is likely that an emergency quest was issued; on the second day, a group of adventurers from the other villages arrived as reinforcements.

They are a little late, but it is a situation where they would be grateful even for the help of a cat*. Even one or two extra pair of hands would be welcomed with open arms.

<TLN: A Japanese phrase that means they're desperate for help.>

"No, we're headed for Iskia Fortress."

"Haha, the selfish whims of a princess, I guess."

Gustav immediately understands the situation.

No matter how bad he is at recognizing people's faces, there is only one person in all of Spada who matches the description of a woman with the wings of an angel.

"No, I wouldn't say that's –"

"It's fine, I'm not plannin' on stoppin' ya. We're worried about them kids stuck in the fortress, too. Well, as you can see, we don't have the luxury of goin' over there and helpin' 'em."

He knows that the students of the Royal Spada Academy came here for the open-field exercise, and he heard the news that they are holed up inside the fortress and waiting for reinforcements from the Assassin-class woman who appeared a few days ago, acting as a messenger.

Of course, he knows that there are many sons and daughters of Spada's royalty and nobility awaiting rescue there, but unfortunately they cannot spare the people to go and help them.

The students would be forced into a difficult battle to hold the fortress, but the village is still waiting for real reinforcements from the Knights' Order to arrive, so they have their hands full protecting the village.

Normally, one would assume that there is no hope for the students, but truthfully, Gustav was not particularly worried about them.

During the enjoyable fight in the Guild bar, he experienced first-hand that the prince of Avalon has skill worthy of the Rank 5 title he possesses.

He knows that with the presence of the rumored [Wing Road], there is hope that the students can hold out until reinforcements arrive.

"I wanted to join the fight here as well. Sorry."

"Gahaha! We'll do something about the village, so don't worry about it! Hurry up and go save 'em!"

"Thanks."

"Thank you."

After receiving the personal thanks from the princess, Gustav sees the two of them off.

Of course, in the direction their horse is going in, the monsters that have just arrived are lying in wait.

“Zedra, open a path for them.”

“Roger that, Head.”

From the top of the tower comes a reply in a low voice and the creaking of the mechanical bow as an arrow is nocked.

“They’re goin’ in with no hesitation. The young ‘uns these days are quite spirited, so I can’t lose to them!”

The man in black and the princess, with their strong resolve. As he murmurs words of admiration for the two, he hears the sound of an arrow being released overhead.

CHAPTER 323

CHARLOTTE'S DECISION

"I've found the Greed-Gore."

Eight days after the battle to hold Iskia Fortress began, on the evening of the 28th of the Month of Platinum (Hakkin), Safiel's servants finally find the Greed-Gore.

She used undead crows to search for the enemy while taking care to avoid detection by the airborne monsters, and even then, she still lost several of them. But today, she has finally achieved her goal.

"Really?! Where is it?!"

"Your voice is too loud."

As Charlotte jumps up in excitement, Safiel gives her a warning with an expressionless face.

The two of them are meeting secretly at the end of a deserted hallway in the fortress, but there is no guarantee that they won't be interrupted.

And this is a topic that should not be overheard by others.

"So, where is it?"

Charlotte lowers her voice to a whisper, and Safiel gives her a reply in an exasperated tone.

"Even if you ask me where it is, I can only tell you that it's out in the Iskia Hills. It's around halfway between this fortress and the village; I saw it lying around at the bank of a pond there."

"Fufu, so it's not out of our reach."

If the Greed-Gore had already finished destroying Iskia Village and taken its army to the next village, she would have had no choice but to give up on exterminating it. But

it seems that she didn't need to worry about that.

"Are we going after it now?"

"Of course!"

As if she believes that this would finally put an end to the gloomy fortress-defense strategy, Charlotte's eyes begin shining.

Of course, it is not only Charlotte, but the rest of the students as well who are tired of this situation where they are holed up in the fortress.

Though it is fortunate that there haven't been any large-scale assaults like there were on the first day, monsters have been attacking in moderate numbers, day and night, so they are constantly under tension.

Even so, they have managed to hold without suffering any casualties so far, but if the monsters attacked in earnest, the students would be in great danger.

The students are exhausted, both in body and mind.

"Well then, I'll have this guide you there, so good luck."

At Safiel's unconcerned tone, Charlotte replies with a slightly anxious expression.

"Hey, is this really alright?"

"It'll be fine, as long as you don't push yourself too hard on your own."

"I know. Even I have the skill to hide my presence, at least."

As if sweeping away her own doubts, Charlotte turns on her heel with a flutter of her trademark red twin-tails.

"I'm making Raa-chan wait outside, so take her with you. I've set her up so she obeys your commands, Sharl."

"... Raa-chan?"

Charlotte looks back with a bewildered expression, and Safiel returns a cool gaze.

“I’m talking about Wrath-pun. It’s reassuring to have her with you, right?”

“Huh, so it’s Raa-chan.”

In response to her friend’s usual display of strange naming sense, Charlotte replies vaguely in a way that neither approves nor disapproves of the name, and –

“Thanks, I’ll use her well.”

With those words, Charlotte leaves.



Before dawn, yet another gunshot rings out across the walls of Iskia Fortress.

The bullet that was fired blows off the head of a Centaur that was foolish enough to approach.

From a window of one of the defensive towers, Simon watches the number of monster corpses surrounding the fortress increase by one.

“... Haah.”

The anxious sigh that he lets out from his small mouth shows that he feels no joy from killing a Rank 2 monster.

It would perhaps be appropriate to say that he is wearing an expression that seems to suggest that he is fed up with this.

He had the sense that he was contributing towards the defense when he was shooting down monsters during the large initial attack, but now, repetitively shooting down monster after monster was beginning to feel like a monotonous task.

“I think another ten of them will come out before someone takes over my shift...”

Mumbling absent-mindedly, Simon loads another round into his sniper rifle, the [Yata-Garasu Mk. II.]

The prototype rifle can hold up to five rounds, but this rifle has superior power and range, making it the obvious choice for sniping from this vantage point, even though

its capacity is only a single round.

The [Yata Garasu] that played a great role in the battle of Alzas was improved at the Stratos Smithing Workshop for pure sniping. It shows none of the limitations of the original model, which was built in a hurry.

As a result, it is not a difficult task for Simon to shoot monsters within the range of the torches' light. But it is still a task.

Simon cannot see particularly well in the dark, nor is he able to use magic to find the enemy. His role is simple, to shoot the monsters that approach.

Therefore, he has not had to remain on constant alert for the monsters hiding within the darkness.

Though the sun has not yet risen, the sky is growing slightly lighter and the usefulness of the magical torches is about to come to an end.

The thick clouds whose rain has been falling upon the fortress intermittently over the past few days are blanketing the sky again today.

Simon gets a strange feeling that today it will pour down heavily.

“Fuwah~”

He unconsciously lets out a yawn.

It is likely because his fatigue has accumulated considerably, not because he is lazy.

It is not only Simon; the other students holed up in this defensive tower are the same.

Eddie was drowsily nodding off, while the serious Shenna was poking at him with her wand.

The dimness inside the defensive towers at the four corners of the fortress only makes them sleepier.

(I have to get a hold of myself; if we're attacked now, we'll be in trouble.)

He gives himself this warning and focuses his mind.

(But I wonder why the monsters aren't making a strong attack. There are a lot of them wandering around as well, making for easy targets... Maybe the parasite can't control them perfectly?)

Though he is an alchemist who is uninterested in fighting, standing at the front lines like this, he cannot help but to think about the enemy.

The fact that the Greed-Gore is using parasites to control the monster army has already been shared among all of the students.

However, the exact details of how the parasites control their hosts have not been explained.

Whether there is some kind of hidden intent behind the monsters' half-baked attacks or whether their leader is just lazy is unknown.

Either way, this is allowing them to buy time and wait for reinforcements, so it is ultimately a blessing.

As Simon is thinking about this while looking out of the tower with vigilance –

“Hmm?”

Suddenly, a person's shadow passes across his vision – or at least, he thinks it did.

He reflexively points the barrel of his rifle in that direction, but he sees nothing except the corpse of the Centaur that he shot moments earlier.

“It's just my imagination... No, it can't be.”

Thinking back on it, he gets the feeling that it was a girl. She passed through with speed and force, her long hair fluttering behind her.

(It might have been a person under the effects of the parasite.)

Even including the time they retreated from the initial encounter with the Greed-Gore, the students have not suffered a single casualty.

However, he heard that many of the teachers that fulfilled the role of the rear guard lost their lives.

But the possibility of them having become new hosts once captured by the monsters cannot be ruled out.

The students have been warned that this could happen to them.

That they should not hesitate to kill their friends if they are infected.

(No, our defense up until today has been successful, I'm sure it won't come to that...)

As this thought crosses his mind –

“They’re attacking!”

A loud voice announces the enemy’s arrival, as if it were some kind of alarm clock set to go off at the break of dawn.

“They’re at the west gate this time!”

“Those of you with the vanguard, let’s hurry over there!”

The languid atmosphere that was hanging over them is swept away completely, suddenly replaced by the tense atmosphere of battle.

Even Eddy, who was dozing off just a moment earlier, is now in front of everyone else, longsword in hand.

“No, wait! Look, they’re coming this way as well –”

An Archer-class student with good eyesight points outside through one of the tower’s small windows.

His finger is pointed at the sun that is climbing over the gentle slope of the hills.

“Eh, wait, you’ve got to be kidding...”

An enormous army of monsters is standing there with the morning sun at their back.

CHAPTER 324

CHARGING IN THE ISKIA HILLS

Thanks to the covering fire of the Golem archer, we easily break through the horde of monsters closing in on Iskia Village.

It's a strange Golem that's colored like a panda and has rabbit ears attached to it for some reason, but there's no doubt that he's a considerably powerful archer.

The projectiles that he fires aren't normal arrows; it'd be better to say they're more like missiles that explode on impact.

He opened up holes in the enemy ranks and I just needed to head for those holes as fast as I could.

And so we've passed through the first wave of enemies, but the real challenge starts here. I need to leave the highway and break through into the Iskia Hills.

"Th-there are so many of them..."

We encounter an enormous group of monsters.

There are all kinds of them on the slopes of the hills, lined up like ants.

The renowned Centaurs and Silent Sheep of Iskia, Rank 1 monsters that I'm familiar with like Goblins and Slimes, and there are even Dortoths, Land Dragons and Morjuras. There are also a few big monsters scattered around that I've never seen before.

It really looks like every single monster in this dungeon has been brought out.

The sky has already grown lighter; even without the illumination of torches, I can clearly see this overwhelming view. Or rather, I'm forced to see it.

I'm moving in completely the opposite direction to the monsters; I'm headed deeper into the dungeon while they're heading outside of it.

"They're headed to Iskia Village, huh."

Even though we passed through the village just a few moments ago, I can't help but to worry as I see the danger closing in on it right before my eyes, but...

"The village will be fine."

Nell whispers, as if she has sensed my unease.

"That red Orc is the leader of a Rank 5 party that is well-known in Spada. The Golem-san that protected us, the Cyclops-san and the Minotaur-san are all there, meaning they have all of their members gathered together. With them there, the village will not fall so easily."

"I see. That's a relief to hear."

But now there's something else I'm worried about.

"In that case, the fortress might be in even more danger."

The Greed-Gore, the general of this monster army, might decide to unleash the monsters' full power after having failed to initially crush both the village and the fortress.

Or in the worst case scenario, the fortress has already fallen to the monsters.

No, it'll be fine, there's no way that's happened.

As far as I've seen, there are no people among the monsters.

The monsters are controlled by parasites. In that case, any defeated people would have been infested and added to the army rather than being eaten by the monsters.

Well, there's no use thinking about things like that. Right now, I need to focus solely on getting to Iskia Fortress.

Fortunately there's some distance between us and the monsters that are advancing towards us, and they're not paying us any special attention as we ride across the slopes of the hills, either.

If we could just keep going and get through unnoticed, that'd be great, but...

“I guess it won’t be that easy after all.”

“Ah, the Centaurs are coming this way!”

As Nell said, there’s a group of monsters that’s broken away from the line of monsters and is heading straight for us. They’re unmistakably Centaurs.

The Centaurs that have separated themselves from the front of the army look like they’re coming here to deliberately block our path.

Given our relative positions, it seems impossible to go around them.

Well then, we have only one option – go straight through them.

“That’s their boss, huh.”

One of the Centaurs charging into battle has red-hair and seems to be the chieftain of their tribe. Both the horse-half and man-half of his body are larger than those around him.

He’s the only one to be equipped with magnificent metal armor to go with his spear, so there’s no doubt he’s their leader.

The Centaurs following him are wearing black wool armor, presumably made from the wool of the Silent Sheep, holding spears and bows in their hands.

These Centaurs that have matching equipment despite the fact that they’re wild monsters are the best among them, chosen for this task.

It seems that even when they’re affected by the parasite, their chain of command is unaffected. And I doubt their combat ability is affected, either.

This cavalry of creatures that are both man and horse in one is quite powerful, but –

“Nell, I’ll be relying on you for defensive support. The ones behind us are holding back, so it’ll be fine to keep it to a bare minimum.”

“Yes, Kurono-kun!”

We can do it, with the two of us, we can definitely break through.

This is actually the first time Nell and I are fighting together, but strangely enough, I confidently believe this.

“Let’s go! HAAAH!”

I whip Merry with my tentacle-reins and we begin our decisive charge towards the group of Centaurs.

“[Element Boost!] – قوينة عناصر من العديدت ل بية هيرو شي ك يكو”

At the same time, Nell invokes her enhancement magic.

The fact that she can cast a spell just by singing an elegant melody shows how proficient she is at using magic.

Fiona’s like this as well; they’re really beautiful when they’re chanting their spells.

As I think these somewhat inappropriate thoughts, the magic takes its effect on me. The magical power flowing through my body doubles in size – no, maybe it’s better to say that it becomes thicker and more condensed – it feels something like that.

As its name suggests, [Element Boost] enhances magic of elements such as fire, ice or lightning.

Just how much could black magic be enhanced? It’s hard to say, but it’s enhancing fire-element magic this time, so it’s clear and simple.

“Concentration Boost! – ك لمة وعيه سري عمة م بكرة محامية”

Yet another enhancement spell. This one’s name is also self-explanatory; it increases concentration to improve magic use.

As well as simply increasing the speed at which spells can be cast, it enhances the processing of magical formulas in the mind, so it’s possible to cast multiple spells simultaneously.

“Bullet Arts.”

I have no problem casting the black magic that I’m most comfortable with using, even on horseback.

A line of black bullets appears to enclose the area around Merry and I, silently waiting for my command to fire.

I'm casting a single spell to use the Bullet Arts, but thanks to the [Concentration Boost], I can invoke yet another spell.

"Sword Arts –"

This is another black magic spell that I'm used to casting, but it'll be a little different from now on.

"– Nameless Nine."

The swords I summon aren't matching low-quality longswords, but the nine cursed weapons I obtained the day before yesterday.

A longsword, a dagger, a rapier, a scimitar, a battle-axe, a tomahawk, a short lance, a halberd and a trident.

Their shapes are all different, but they are all jet-black, showing that they're under my control.

Nine malicious voices resonate inside my head, talking over each other, but they are very quiet.

"Work hard for Goshuujin-sama, newcomers!"

The voice of the talkative Hitsugi-chan is far louder. Actually, she's putting on an air as if to say that she's their senpai; is she trying to be their cursed-maid-leader or something?

"[Speed High-Boost!] – أَسْرَعُ! تَشْدَغِيلُ الْقَدَمِ سُرْعَةً خِلَالِ مَنْ يَعْملُ "

And then the last Boost.

Rather than the wind blowing in my favor, I begin moving at a speed that's as if I myself have become the wind myself. With this additional acceleration support, we're completely ready to make our charge.

"HAAH! IYAAAAAH!"

The red-haired Centaur's shouts are the command to attack.

As if to say that he will take us head on, he makes his charge as well.

Spears raised. Bows ready.

The bowstrings that look as if they've been made from plant vines creak as they are drawn back as far as possible, but before the cavalry archers let their arrows loose – I'll take my shot first.

In my right hand are not Merry's reins, but a machete with a shining crimson blade, [Wrath-pun's Right Arm.]

A sphere containing black flames has been produced at its tip.

Because of the fire-attribute enhancement from both [Element Boost] and [Wrath-pun's Right Arm], it's twice as powerful as when I tried it out at the academy's training grounds.

That time, the explosion caught my target and the ones on either side of it, so it'll be interesting to see how many Centaurs I'll blow away with this.

“ [Grenade Burst.] ”

The sphere launches with an eardrum-bursting roar.

With a momentary black flash, it flies in a straight line towards the herd of Centaurs.

Impact. Explosion. Flames.

My vision is filled with ominous black-and-red flames.

“W-wow, amazing...”

Nell's surprise-filled voice reaches my ears.

What do you think of my magic, it's flashy, right? I want to say something like that boastfully, but unfortunately I don't have the time to be doing that.

“OOAAAH!”

The Centaurs' war cries reverberate from the other side of the flames as they leap over the corpses of their fallen companions.

Due to either the courage they normally possessed or the effects of the parasite, these half-man half-horse creatures don't falter in the slightest and continue forward to attack.

Without a moment's delay, I invoke my next counterattack.

"Full Burst."

The black barrage that I unleash on the Centaurs doesn't let any of them come close.

I used Grenade Burst with the aim of opening a hole in the enemy lines, and then Bullet Arts to intercept them at medium range.

Unfortunately, even with Nell's support, it's impossible for me to use the [Full Burst] that fires in every direction multiple times in quick succession.

Instead, I use –

"Gatling Burst."

In my left hand, I summon the still-unnamed prototype rifle. Fire is emitted from its twin barrels.

I ride straight into the gap opened by the Grenade Burst, firing blindly.

Merry's legs do not falter even as we pass over the hollowed-out ground or the corpse fragments rolling around; they sink into the ground firmly and leap over the obstacles as we make our way through.

From this point, we won't be able to avoid contact with the enemy.

I'm mowing down the enemies that are closing in on us with Gatling Burst, but its effective range is too short.

The sheer number of enemies reminds me of the battle of Alzas, but all the enemies here are cavalry, so it's even worse.

“HAAH!”

As the smoke clears, the Centaurs charge through the gunfire, spears raised.

From here on, I have to defend myself at close range.

“Pierce them, Sword Arts!”

As if tired of waiting, the longsword that drove the handsome Elf to insanity flies in first.

This is the only weapon that’s not too different from the usual swords used in Sword Arts, but it’s still a cursed weapon after all.

It finds its mark, piercing through the forehead of a tough-looking Centaur.

As if to say that it hasn’t had enough blood, it pulls itself out of the Centaur’s head and dances towards the other Centaurs that were running alongside the first.

It acts even before I give it a target; it’s got a will of its own.

But that’s fine for now. My only ally is at my back and everything around us are enemies, enemies, enemies. It can go ahead and drink as much blood as it wants.

The weapons that I’ve called the [Nameless Nine] dance through the air, only partially controlled by my will.

The valiant Centaurs passing through the slashes of the nine weapons have no chance.

“Akanagi.”

I face the enemies directly with my favorite cursed weapon, [Absolute Malice Hatchet”Neck Cutter.”]

The Centaurs’ spears have longer reach than a hatchet, but if I compensate for that with the blade of blood, there’s no problem.

With a crimson flash, I cut through a Centaur’s spear and straight through his entire body.

The weapon in my hand has already grown an enormous hatchet blade.

Straight after my first attack, I throw [Wrath-pun's Right Arm] to join the weapons of the Sword Arts.

Though it's preparing for the second and third attack, so it's not actually joining the [Nameless Nine] in their independent attacks.

But even using all of my black magic simultaneously, I cannot easily overcome the difference in numbers.

My attacks have been one sided so far, but that stops now.

The Centaurs have begun firing their arrows.

"To think they'd shoot at me even though I'm engaged in melee combat."

I don't know if they are firing willingly, knowing that their allies will certainly be hit, but their arrows are already in the air.

I'm using all of my concentration to focus on attacking. I can't afford to prepare a defense, and there's no way we can avoid the arrows on horseback.

ك - ب ير جدار ال جماهير ه يرو شي ال ري اح دوامات ك يكو منعت " [Air Wall Defan.] "

But I don't need to worry; I've left the defense to Nell. And she's answered my expectations.

A swirling, turbulent wall of wind wraps around us.

It completely throws off the trajectories of the arrows pouring down on us, not letting a single one through.

The torrent of arrows was fired knowing that there will be friendly fire. It rains down upon the Centaurs gathered around us, felling several dozen of them.

But as expected of the powerful Centaurs, even with one or two arrows piercing their bodies, as long as their vital organs haven't been hit, they can vigorously continue running on their strong four legs with their spears raised.

“Kuh, what toughness...”

I inadvertently let out words of both admiration and frustration.

Compared to the human Crusader soldiers, monsters are ridiculously tough.

I have to use dozens of magic bullets to stop their bodies from moving, and if the cursed weapons miss the Centaurs' vitals, they grasp onto the weapons with both hands and refuse to let go as their final act of resistance.

“ [Grenade Burst!] ”

“– [Lux Armor Shield!] ”

Once more, I fire a perfectly formed sphere.

Immediately afterwards, a spear being thrust at us from behind – no, a whole row of spears – is repelled by Nell's defensive light magic.

The explosion blows away multiple centaurs again, but it's less powerful compared to my first attack. It doesn't deal enough damage to turn the tides.

Even after sustaining heavy casualties, the half-dead Centaurs are hot on our heels and closing in on us, slipping through the magic bullets and cursed weapons.

This is bad. At this rate, we'll be overwhelmed by their numbers before we can pick enough of them off.

Thanks to the speed enhancement, we can move in a straight line faster than the Centaurs, but we can't go at full speed while avoiding them to the left or right, so we can't shake them off completely.

We can't defeat them or escape from them unless we decrease their numbers further.

It doesn't need to be said. We have to do our best to keep attacking while running as fast as we can. We have no choice, there's no other option.

It'll be close, but it'll work out somehow. No, if we can't even get through this, there's no point in us going to the fortress as reinforcements!

“UOOOH!”

As if shaking off my hesitation, I brandish my hatchet. I cut a Centaur closing in from the left in half.

After cutting him down, I get a clear view to my left.

“FNH, HAAH!”

Several dozen meters away, the red-haired boss is keeping pace with us.

I thought I’d blown him away with my first [Grenade Burst] , but I guess that red hair isn’t just for show. He has a high resistance to heat.

The steel armor that he probably stole from some adventurer *has* been blown away, but he lets out a ferocious war cry that tells me that he hasn’t taken any damage to his body. He holds up his incredibly long spear with his lean, strong arms.

He’s holding the spear in an underhand grip, with the front portion of its handle resting on his shoulder. He’s not coming to stab me directly; that’s the motion of throwing a spear.

And it’s not just a normal throw. I can feel the magical power intensifying around his arm and spear, even at this distance.

This is bad, I have to quickly counter-attack –

“AAAAAH!”

“Shit!”

To prevent their boss’s all-out attack from being interrupted, the other Centaurs desperately flood in towards me.

“I will handle this!”

“I’ll leave it to you!”

I’ll rely on Nell to defend us from the Centaurs coming in from all directions. Meanwhile, I’ll kill the boss.

I stop firing Gatling Burst for a moment to aim the barrel of the gun at him.

Simon's special, enhanced-penetration ammunition has been loaded in the gun, waiting for its time, and I fire it now. With normal magic bullets, I'd need several dozen of them to stop that boss's movements, but with this, I need only one.

I have to stop him before he fires that javelin. As this intuitive alarm is ringing loudly inside my head –

“PLEASE MAKE IT IN TIIIME!”

I pull the trigger.

CHAPTER 325

MERRY

Even in the midst of the fierce battle, the sound of the gunshot is incredibly loud.

The twin bullets fired horizontally from the two barrels cross the distance of less than twenty meters in the blink of an eye, looking to consume their prey.

With a short dying cry, the red-haired boss leading the elite Centaurs falls in the hills of Iskia.

The bullet pulverizes what is left of the steel armor protecting his upper half and penetrates his body, thoroughly destroying it.

But he is not dead.

Despite the fact that he is a monster, perhaps the Centaur's pride as a commander has allowed him to throw his javelin with all his strength.

Even Kurono likely knew that he would not make it in time to stop this attack.

With this great spear coming towards him, he prepares to intercept it with the [Absolute Malice Hatchet"Neck Cutter"] in his right hand.

Even with the instability due to being on horseback, if the spear targets either him or Nell he will be able to repel it one way or another. With Kurono's skill, it is definitely possible.

"What?!"

But if the spear's aim is Merry, blocking it is impossible.

No matter how large the hatchet's blade is, it does not have the reach to cover the horse's back legs.

He cannot swing [Absolute Malice Hatchet"Neck Cutter"] as he wants to. He can only helplessly watch as the spear pierces the lean muscles of Merry's rear body.

If striking the leader is too greedy, striking his horse would be better – the Centaur has succeeded in that.

“UOH!”

“KYA!”

With a neigh of agony that drowns out both their screams, Merry’s legs buckle and she tumbles over.

With the spear functioning as an emergency brake to stop Merry’s full-speed sprint, the two passengers are thrown violently from her back.

Even as Kurono spins two or three times in mid-air, he sees Merry falling.

And in the moment before she hits the ground, Merry sees her master.

“– HITSUGI!”

Trying to suppress the feelings of self-hatred welling up in the depths of his heart, Kurono focuses on what he needs to be done in this moment.

He can easily make a safe landing after having been thrown into the air, but the same cannot be said for Nell.

Sensing Nell’s position largely through instinct, he orders the tentacle maid to catch her.

He feels the sensation of the Anchor Hands digging into Nell’s soft body, and in the next moment, Nell herself comes flying into his arms.

“Wawah!”

Even though they’re friends, Kurono has no doubt that she is reluctant to be held in the arms of a man but knows that the situation leaves them with no choice, so she’ll just has to endure it.

With Nell in his arms, Kurono controls his altitude perfectly as he falls and lands safely on the ground.

“Wah, ah, err, Kurono-kun...”

“Nell, cover me.”

After landing safely on the grass of the hills, Kurono quickly puts Nell down without looking at her and looks straight ahead – in the direction that they had come from.

Kurono sees Centaurs crowded around Merry, repeatedly thrusting their spears into her.

It is clearly overkill, an act of cruelty.

Merry is just a horse, after all, a method of transport.

Less than three months have passed since she was purchased, not enough for her to be called a long-time companion.

But does that mean that Kurono can feel nothing in this situation?

“I’m sorry, Merry.”

When Kurono rode Merry for the first time, he was so unskilled that he could not control her properly without Lily’s help.

Even though he lacked the experience, he continued to ride her; Fiona had ridden Merry with him during their date, and he had even been taught a way to practice riding her.

After increasing their sense of unity by letting magical energy flow between them, Merry became accustomed to Kurono.

And before he knew it, Merry was running with all her might, even when facing this group of elite Centaurs.

“I’m sorry...”

There is more than enough reason for him to feel an attachment to her. More than enough for him to have faith in her.

For Kurono, Merry had become an irreplaceable, necessary companion.

That is why Kurono is whispering words of apology with tears coming from his eyes.

He is mourning her death – no.

“Merry, won’t you still take me to the fortress...?”

Kurono is apologizing because he needs to continue using her, even after her death.

If he loses his horse here, there is no way he can make it to Iskia Fortress in time. Even without taking distance into account, there would be no way to outrun the monsters without Merry.

Even if he annihilated this group of Centaurs, there is no saying that a second or third one will not appear to block their path – in fact, it would be strange if there were no more obstacles ahead.

Kurono needs Merry’s legs, no matter what. He cannot lose his horse here.

And Kurono possesses a way to make the deceased Merry run once more.

“Sing, [Haunted Grave.] ”

He calls forth a large naginata.

It was originally black, but with Kurono’s blackening, even its blade has been dyed a jet-black color now.

He has already put his hatchet, rifle and the nameless nine weapons back into his Shadow; the [Haunted Grave] is his only weapon now.

He faces the several dozen remaining Centaurs, who have not lost their fighting spirit even after losing their boss.

Kurono is a little uneasy about using this weapon for the first time, but it should not be forgotten that the [Haunted Grave] is a cursed weapon.

Saeed Maya Hydra, who was not a fighter during his lifetime, fought Kurono on even terms with this weapon in his hand.

If Kurono were to wield it, being a veteran adventurer who can control curses

perfectly, he would give new meaning to its technique and display just as much skill with it as its original owner.

In fact, even though Kurono faces the Centaurs charging at him like surging waves, he does not doubt that he will be victorious for even a single moment.

They are sacrifices for Merry to be revived, and at the same time –

KYAAAAAAAAAAH!

They are the audience for this repulsive melody of resurrection. The cursed performance called [Dead Revival] –



The cemetery on the town's outskirts had a gravekeeper whose appearance had not changed for a hundred years – this story was familiar to anyone who lived in the town.

It was not a mere rumor or ghost story. There really was a gravekeeper living there.

Everyone described the gravekeeper's appearance as that of a beautiful white woman dressed in black.

And everyone in the town was surely been told by their grandfathers,"Her appearance hasn't changed at all since I was a kid."

The identity of the gravekeeper was unknown. Nobody wanted to know, they mustn't know; this was something that does not need to be said.

But she had a duty. She buried corpses with nowhere else to go, offered them a requiem and sent their souls peacefully to heaven.

So that they would not harbor any malice to rise again as Undead.

"Gravekeeper-sama, please grant my request."

Another corpse had been brought to her today.

The one being placed inside the coffin was a small girl.

A girl with no relatives had died of illness. That was clear from the fact that her lifeless body was here, and from her thin, withered body.

The gravekeeper didn't question anything. No matter what kind of wicked person, adorable child, or lonely elderly person is sent her way, she merely buried them silently.

Knowing this, the townspeople simply left the corpses in her care with a modest payment and quickly returned to the town. There was no unnecessary exchange of words.

The gravekeeper carried out her work indifferently.

She placed countless coffins in the countless graves and buried them.

There was nobody around to grieve over these people's deaths and fill the air with their sobs, let alone a priest to speak a rite of purification.

The only thing that could be heard in this melancholic cemetery in the corner of a dark forest was the cry of the Nightingales*.

<TLN: The kanji below this is "graveyard bird" which is definitely not the native Japanese word for nightingale, so this may be a special kind of nightingale.>*

No, after burying these bodies and from morning until evening, on these two occasions, the melody of the gravekeeper's requiem song flowed in the air.

And so she sang again today.

There was not a single person other than the dead buried here that have heard this song – or at least, that should have been the case.

"Kuh... Ugh..."

In response to the voice that reached her ears as she finished singing, the gravekeeper raised the Haunted Grave.

It was impossible for someone to attend her service.

The only ones to visit this place other than the deceased would be the monsters that

come here, seeking dead flesh to eat.

It was not particularly rare for this to happen, but with the black naginata that she wielded, she didn't allow any monster to defile the graves.

But as she pointed her weapon in the direction that the voice came from, her crimson eyes opened wide in surprise.

She had performed her role as a gravekeeper for over a hundred years, but this had never happened before.

“Ugh... Kuh... UWAAAAH!”

There was a young man sobbing there.

“Who... are you?”

That was how the gravekeeper met the boy.

CHAPTER 326

THE GRAVEKEEPER'S SONG

The younger sister of the twins had always had a weak constitution, ever since she was born.

From the very beginning, she never had a father. By the time she was old enough to notice, her mother had died as well. The sick younger sister has only a single family member left.

“Don't worry, Onii-chan will definitely make you better!”

The young boy who was her older brother loved his younger sister from the bottom of his heart, as she was the only family member he had left. Not once did he ever think of abandoning her.

However, the orphans' lifestyle could only be described as "poor". Of course, there was no way they could afford the medicine to cure the sister's illness.

Though he was young, the boy worked earnestly. The amount of money he earned was pitiful, and sometimes he wasn't even paid.

Dirty work, hard work, he did anything as long as it wasn't illegal.

If he were to be caught even once, there would be nobody to look after his younger sister, so he didn't dare risk turning to crime. And above all, he possessed a heart of virtue.

Over time, slowly but surely, he saved his money.

A little more, just a little more, and he would be able to buy the medicine by his sister's thirteenth birthday that was approaching.

“Sorry, Onii-chan, I'm sorry... I've only been a burden to you up until now. I'm sorry.”

The day before her birthday. Leaving those final words, the younger sister died.

With nobody reaching out a hand to save her, after living such a short life, suffering in illness, she died. Her life ended tragically.

I'll die too.

In front of his sister who had turned completely cold, the boy thought this, with no hesitation.

"In the cemetery on the outskirts of town, there's a gravekeeper whose appearance has not changed since a hundred years ago. One mustn't approach her, one mustn't become familiar with her. She is definitely some kind of witch. If one carelessly steps into the depths of the cemetery, he will surely join the corpses -"

The boy had heard this rumor.

It was exactly what he wished for.

With no relatives, his younger sister would definitely be sent there. With the boy's meager fortune, there would be no way he could build her a grave in a proper temple.

A carriage left the town immediately, with the younger sister in a coffin loaded in the back.

The boy snuck onto the carriage to ride with her, whispering that he would soon be going "over there" to be by her side.

"Th-that's the gravekeeper..."

Seeing the gravekeeper at the cemetery in the dark forest, the boy felt an emotion other than the sadness that he had felt since his sister had died.

Her skin was as white as snow, and her hair was even whiter than that. But her eyes were a pure, shining red.

The face visible beneath the bobbed, silver-white hair at her shoulders resembled a doll that his sister had once wanted. She looked somewhat inhuman, but unbelievably beautiful.

Though the boy was not yet an adult, his eyes were drawn to her slender arms and legs and the feminine curves of her body that were visible even through her black

clothes.

But the most surprising thing was that although she was a woman, she was carrying an entire coffin with just her left hand.

In her right hand was a weapon with a long handle and a crescent-shaped blade. The weapon left a fearsome impression on him, as if it could slice his finger off even with the lightest touch.

But because she displayed such inhuman beauty and power, just like the rumors, he thought that she would do him the favor of ending his life.

If he died next to his sister, the gravekeeper would surely bury him next to her.

With that expectation, the boy stayed completely still and breathed quietly, hiding himself until the burial was complete.

The coffin disappeared into the earth.

Seeing his younger sister leave this world's surface, grief welled up in him once more.

But at the same time, he knew the moment of his own death was approaching, causing him to feel more than a little fear deep in his chest as he raised his head.

As he wiped away cold sweat and his body stiffened with the fear that the gravekeeper would notice him just by hearing the sound of his racing heartbeat -

“ضوء وعلى، الاموات لجمع الأب دية الراحة ي عطي الله أب يض ضوء”

He heard the gravekeeper's song.

No instrumental performance accompanied it; it was an acappella requiem with just the sound of her voice.

Its lyrics were either in the language of a faraway foreign country or perhaps in an ancient language; the boy couldn't make any sense of them at all. However, even so -

“Uh... Ugh...”

The gentle melody pierced into the depths of his heart. It was as if it were a lullaby

that his mother had sung to him when he was a child.

“Kuh... Ugh... Thank... you...”

The boy knew that his younger sister's soul had been saved.

This beautiful, wonderful melody would send her to heaven. There was no way that she wouldn't be happy, that she wouldn't be saved.

The boy's sister's bright smile surfaces in his mind.

Yes, his sister was now departing for the distant heavens with that smile on her face.

He believed that from the bottom of his heart.

Her poor lifestyle, the pain of her illness - looking back, it may have been a life without a single good thing.

But at the very end, his sister was able to move on happily.

That made him happier than anything else, and he felt as if the life he had spent helping her had finally been rewarded.

“Ugh... Kuh... UWAAAAH!”

So he wasn't afraid anymore.

“Who... are you?”

Even though the gravekeeper had finally appeared before his eyes to end his life.



“You are not a grave robber, so why do I have to kill you?”

The gravekeeper was bewildered over this unprecedented event.

Both at the fact that this boy who was a citizen of the town had appeared here, and at the fact that an unfounded rumor had been spread, a rumor saying that she would kill anyone who came to this cemetery.

Somehow, with several hours of explanation, she finally succeeded in clearing up that misunderstanding.

"I-I'm sorry..."

The older brother of the young girl who had been buried here today was shrinking in cowardice, as if he could not express his apology in words alone.

He did indeed resemble her.

His face was a little gaunt, but looking closely, it was much lovelier than the girl in the grave.

But with the grief of losing his twin sister, he was now a troubled boy who had thought to follow after her.

"It's late. It's too dangerous to return to the town now, so you should stay here."

Putting her limited common sense to use, the gravekeeper decided to look after the boy by providing him a meal and a place to stay for the night.

He was the first guest to be invited into the small, old shrine that she lived in.

"Thank you very much for treating me to such a meal."

"It's not much."

"Err... So you do eat meals normally, don't you?"

"Do those townspeople think I sustain myself on the mist...?"

It was her first time having this kind of idle conversation with someone.

Would she, who has been a gravekeeper right from the beginning, be able to enjoy a normal chat with another person?

It wasn't like she hadn't considered this question before, and now the boy had the impression that the gravekeeper was thoughtless. But not minding that, she indulged in this conversation. Immersed herself in it, even.

“How is the temperature of the bath?”

“It's just perfect. Umm, I'm really sorry, even using your bath...”

“Don't worry about that. More importantly, you seem to be quite dirty, allow me to wash you.”

“Eh, that's -”

She also tried experiencing what was called "naked accompaniment."

<TLN: Maybe this is a phrase in Japanese, it certainly isn't in English to my knowledge...>

She had been under the conceited expression that this would allow the boy to open himself up to her more, but for some reason, after he got out of the bath, his face was red and he averted his eyes from her.

It was a little shocking for her.

“Good night.”

“Yeah, good night.”

The two of them slept in a single bed.

The bed felt more cramped than usual, but strangely enough, this was not an unpleasant thing.

“Umm, thank you very much.”

Suddenly, the boy thanked her again, even though he had already thanked her too many times to count.

“For holding that memorial for my younger sister. That song felt really beautiful, warm and gentle. I'm sure my sister was able to happily go to heaven, so thank you.”

“I-I see... I mean, as a gravekeeper, I just did the work that's expected of me. You... don't have to be so... formal.”

The gravekeeper's heart began to beat quickly after hearing those words, and she

found it difficult to fall asleep.

Why was she feeling like this? Right before she fell into a deep slumber, she came across the answer.

“Since I was born, nobody has ever praised my singing before...”

The next day. The time for the boy to return to the town had come.

“Thank you for letting me stay here for the night.”

“Ah, ah...”

The gravekeeper found herself bewildered once more by yet another new emotion in her heart.

She had lived for a hundred years on her own, so her solitude wasn't even something that she was aware of; it was normal for her.

Therefore, she hadn't felt the emotion known as “loneliness.”

Until now, when she had to part ways with the boy.

She wanted to say something and stop him. But she couldn't find the words.

She was a gravekeeper; she had always been one and this would be her eternal duty from now on as well.

And he was just a child. He would continue to live his life in that large town, become an adult, age and die someday.

This incident was nothing more than an irregular event that happened once in a hundred years. So she would never see the boy again. There was no reason or need for that.

“Umm, is it alright if I come here again?”

That was why she thought those words must be a lie.

“I won't ever think of following my sister to the other side again, but I never want to

forget about her.”

There was no way there could be such a convenient reason.

“And I want to hear that song one more time.”

No, if these words were not lies, then this must be a dream or a hallucination.

But there was no mistake that the boy giving her a shy smile under this clear blue sky was, in fact, real.

“Yes, come any time you wish, and I'll welcome you.”



The boy visited the cemetery once every three days.

“Hello.”

“Ah. I've been waiting for you.”

Before the gravekeeper knew it, having the boy around had become a natural thing.

Neither their difference in gender nor the extraordinary difference in their age prevented them from deepening their relationship with each other.

At least, as time went on and the season changed, the gravekeeper became more and more drawn to the boy.

“ضوء وعلی، الاموات لجمیع الأب دیة الراحة ی عطي الله أب یض ضوء” (O White God, please grant upon all the souls of the dead eternal rest, and shine upon them your endless light.)”

The requiem they sang in front of his younger sister's grave was a routine ceremony for the two of them.

However, around the time the season changed, the song was sung not by one voice, but two.

“It seems you've remembered the song perfectly now.”

“But I still don't understand what the lyrics mean.”

Seeing the boy's embarrassed laugh, the gravekeeper's heart was filled with an indescribable happiness.

“Your pronunciation is perfect. And your voice is wonderful.”

“Th-thank you.”

She would probably have said this even if the boy was completely tone-deaf.

But perhaps coincidentally, the boy did indeed have a talent for singing. The gravekeeper's compliments were not merely flattery; she spoke them truthfully.

And then even more time passed.

Before they knew it, it had almost been a year since they first met.

“Earlier, I sang this song at the bar that I work at. Umm, I'm sorry for singing it without your permission.”

One day, the boy came and made this apology.

“That's not really *my* song; you can sing it as you wish.”

The song wasn't originally something that nobody was supposed to hear; it was just an old requiem. Nothing more, nothing less.

The gravekeeper was delighted that the boy had become happy through the song that she had taught him.

He was only a bar assistant, but when she asked him about it, his song had apparently been well received by the customers that he performed it to and they had given him money that slightly exceeded his monthly pay.

Up until now, the gravekeeper had been offering to financially help the boy who had continued to live a poor life, but he had refused.

As the gravekeeper did not have the ability for telepathy, she could not tell whether it was just him holding back from asking for too much, just simple male stubbornness

or even an earnest sense of nobility.

Even so, she knew. She knew that to live a happy lifestyle in the town, one would need a certain amount of money as a base requirement.

She didn't know if the boy's wages would meet that minimum amount so she was quite worried, but it seemed that the situation had unexpectedly improved.

"If singing that song can make you happy, then there's nothing wrong with it. And I wish for your happiness more than anyone else."

"Yes, thank you very much!"

As if the gravekeeper's wish had been heard, the boy's lifestyle changed from the poor one that he had been living until now.

The elegant yet mysterious requiem melody that the boy sang gained fame across the town overnight.

His talent for singing was unmistakably genuine; he was even more of a genius than the gravekeeper had initially thought.

His voice completely mesmerized men and women of all ages.

Before he knew it, the boy had changed occupations from bar assistant to exclusive singer, and his income increased tenfold - no, a hundredfold.

In less than a month, he had become the town's idol.

"Hello."

Even so, the boy visited the gravekeeper.

His appearance was no longer that of a shabby orphan; his clothes were so tidy that he looked like a nobleman's son.

If one looked closely, it was clear that he even had some light makeup on. The boy's face exuded beauty that would match a girl of the same age.

"Ah, I've been waiting for you -"

No matter how beautiful or rich he became, the boy still made contact with the gravekeeper.

His heart remained just as obedient and pure as the day that they had met.

“- really, I've grown tired of waiting for you.”

That was exactly why the gravekeeper was worried.

Even after becoming an idol, the boy continued to come here. However, the frequency of his visits went from once every three days to once every five, then once a week - steadily decreasing.

Their desire to meet grew stronger, but the opportunities to do so grew fewer.

The sleepless nights continued. Her feelings of longing for the boy scorched her heart.

She began to feel bitter towards the "town" that interfered with her meetings with him.

The gravekeeper persuaded herself - no, that wasn't it.

“I'll be fine as long as he is happy.”

She didn't want him to end up like his younger sister.

“I can't make him happy.”

She was a gravekeeper. She would not be allowed to abandon her duty and leave this place.

“He can't live in this graveyard.”

He was a human. He was enjoying a free life, not bound by anything.

“It's fine, there's no helping it. Because I'm a -”

The Homunculus gravekeeper that had been born through ancient magic could never be married to a human.

Until the several hundred years of her expected period of operation were finished, she would never be able to leave this ancient temple. Such a setting had been made.

There was no way that a human would think to spend one's entire life in this melancholic graveyard. This would be especially true for an idol with a bright, promising future ahead of him -

“... What did you say?”

Just as she made this decision, the time came for them to part ways.

“He said that he's... my father.”

Visiting the gravekeeper for the first time in a month, the boy said that his father, who he had never met before in his entire life, had appeared.

“His name is, err, too long for me to remember, but he's really important. He's apparently a nobleman.”

It was unsurprising news.

Fourteen years ago, this nobleman visited this town and had a one-night relation with a certain girl.

The girl became pregnant and gave birth to twins.

But that was all.

“A nobleman, you say...”

He had not come back just on a whim. He had returned to take up the new post of feudal lord, to govern this town.

“Yes, he said that he was unable to come to this town until now due to some circumstances, but he really wanted to come and see Mother and us.”

Just how much of this was truth?

The other-worldly gravekeeper did not have a good understanding of the situation in the town. She had no idea how aristocratic society worked.

But she was aware that nobles were of different social status from the commoners.

Everyone admired them.

Large mansions, delicious food, beautiful clothes, servants that waited on them - the privileged class, the peak of luxury. If one were to ask who the happiest people in this world were, the answer would probably be them.

"If I'm accepted as his child, I won't be able to visit this place -"

"You should go."

"Eh?"

"He's your real father, is he not? Being with your family should make you the happiest."

There was no way that she would stop him. There was no way that she would hold him back.

He was about to step onto the shining road of nobility.

Given that, how could she try to imprison him in this dark graveyard for his whole life with a mere doll like herself?

For the gravekeeper who wished for the boy's happiness, there was no other answer.

"I-I will definitely return here one day."

"Yeah."

"I will give a much better song to my sister."

"Yeah."

"So when that time comes, please sing with me again."

"Yeah, I promise. I will always await your return."

And so the two of them said their farewells.

The gravekeeper returned to her solitude once more.

But the happiness of the one she loved was granted, and the promise of their reunion had been made. So she was able to spend her days with a more human-like expression on her face than she had ever worn in the hundred years leading up to now.



It was fast approaching three months since the gravekeeper and boy had parted ways.

“Grave-keeper-sama, please take care of this person.”

Today, another corpse had been left with her.

In the moment she reached her hand towards the coffin to check its contents -

“Please wait. That person is a hero who saved the town. However, the damage to the body is severe, and it is now in a terrible state. Please do not do him the dishonor of exposing his body once more.”

Did he die fighting monsters, perhaps? Seeing as he was being called a hero of the town, this was a reasonable guess.

However, the gravekeeper was still completely unrelated to the events of the town, so this made no difference to her.

She merely accepted the corpses and offered them the proper treatment and burial.

Severely damaged corpses - in other words, the corpses of those who were exposed to violent attacks - had the pain at the moment of their death linger strongly around them, and this made them easily turn into Undead.

With just a requiem, there might still be a small chance that it would turn into an Undead, so she came to the clear decision of applying purification magic directly onto the corpse.

And so just before the burial, as she opened the coffin -

“Wha...”

This was her reunion with the boy.

“W-what, what is this, why are you -! No, this can't be, this is impossible, this ridiculous thing, it can't be true!”

As the person who had brought the corpse had said, he was in a terrible state.

Only his lovely, beautiful face remained as it had been.

There was no way that she could forget this face. This was the only face that she could not mistake for another.

“Ah, this can't be, this can't be, this can't be, this can't happen, after all, I wished only for... for your happiness. So why -”

So why did he have to die?

What were these wounds on his body?

And why was he completely naked, not dressed in funeral clothes, as if he had simply been thrown into the coffin and discarded?

Even executed criminals were treated better when they were buried. What kind of serious crime would one have to commit to be exposed to such a disgraceful death?

The gravekeeper had been working for a hundred years and seen thousands, tens of thousands of corpses, but this was the first time she had seen one in such an atrocious state.

Why did the one person that she loved have to be the one to suffer the cruelest of fates?

She had wished only for his happiness and accepted that they would be separated for a long time.

She had even desperately resisted her desire to make him hers.

But it seemed that he had become the property of a cruel master.

As if to claim the boy's great charm and even that exceptional voice as their own, someone had branded a family crest into his throat.

“Ah, I see, that's how it is...”

His real father, nobles, the hero of the town - All of this was, once again, unsurprising news.

A certain violent noble had set his eyes on the idol, the boy that everyone in the town was talking about.

It didn't matter whether he was his actual father or not; even if it was a lie, a false pretense, it made an excuse.

All he needed was power. The influence to destroy the town - the position of feudal lord - was all he needed.

A sacrifice, a price to be paid, whatever one wished to call it. In short, the boy had been consumed to satisfy the desires of the nobles.

Judging from his appearance, he had not known anything, not been told anything, and nobody had tried to tell him.

And so he had become a priceless sacrifice.

“... you... all.”

He had lived the past three months as an amusing plaything for the nobles.

And for the past three months, the gravekeeper had simply awaited his return like a fool.

She didn't do anything, she couldn't do anything.

Even though he had suffered this much. Even though he had been suffering like this, so close by to her.

“... I'll kill you all.”

She couldn't forgive herself.

“I'll kill you all, I'll kill you all!”

There was no way that she could forgive herself.

While saying that she wished for his happiness, she made the foolish choice of giving up on granting him that happiness herself from the very beginning.

"I'll kill you all, I'll kill you all, I'll kill you all, I'll kill you all, I'll kill you all, I'll kill you all!"

And the ones that she couldn't forgive, most of all -

"I'll kill you all, you bastards, every single one of you -"

Were the people who had caused his death.

"I'll slaughter you all, AAAAAAAAAAGGGHHHH!"

Her loud scream of resentment echoed out loudly.

The malice in that scream was so powerful and deep that it became a wave of negative influence that swept over the cemetery.

This phenomenon was only possible because it was she who had been the one to live on for these hundred years, burying the dead and bestowing eternal peace to their souls.

"Ah... Aaah..."

As if responding to the gravekeeper's voice, the dead began to rise.

With his bloodless, pale face, the boy opened his empty eyes.

At the same time, the gravekeeper suppressed her resentful expression and turned to face him calmly.

The gravekeeper's white, smiling face with her pupils that were fading in color entered the boy's unfocused field of vision.

"I've grown tired of waiting for our reunion. To think that you'd come back to me in only three months, fufufu, it seems that you were even lonelier than I was. No, I'm not blaming you, I'm just happy."

The dead who rise as Undead are completely different to the people they were in life; they are simply monsters.

The boy was now a Zombie, an Undead monster of the lowest rank.

There was no way that she wouldn't know this.

After all, her most important duty as a gravekeeper was to ensure that the dead would not revive as Undead.

“Ah, that's right, we promised to sing together, didn't we? Come, let's sing.”

However, the gravekeeper embraced the boy as she had once done in happier times.

Though she pressed him against her chest, his cheeks would never again redden in embarrassment.

And of course, the beautiful voice that had captivated the people would never again come from his mouth.

ي وعمل، لاموات اع لجمية بدي الأاحة الري عط ي لله ايض أبوء ضء
”ضوء“

The song that echoed across the cemetery was a requiem - or it should have been, but the melody was corrupted, became disarrayed and finally came undone, and the purification effect began to change.

Instead of calming the souls, the song stimulated them wildly, provoked them and made them savage, preventing their eternal rest and weaving a melody of resurrection.

The next to open her eyes was the boy's younger sister.

The requiem - no, dead-reviving song that had now become a curse that caused her young corpse to begin moving once more, climbing out of her coffin and rising from the earth.

“Haha,ahaha, I should have just done this from the beginning, right? See, now you can live with your sister again.”

Looking at the younger sister's corpse again as she moved, she really did have a lovely face that resembled her brother's.

But her body had already spent over a year beneath the earth's surface and had decomposed in various places; she was still nothing more than a filthy Undead.

“Fufu, is your throat not feeling well today? You aren't singing, are you? Ah, could it be that you can only be satisfied with a larger audience, now that you're an idol? That's fine, I'll call an audience for you soon, look -”

As the gravekeeper let out another cry, skeletal hands rose from the earth one by one to answer her call.

The graveyard from which not even a single grave had been robbed in a hundred years was now being completely dug up by the gravekeeper that watched over it.

Corpses from a hundred years ago, from ten years ago, from yesterday, all of them were disturbed from their peaceful slumber to suffer in this world once more.

“Hmm, perhaps this still isn't enough. It's fine, we'll add more and more "people" to the audience, starting with all of the people in the town -”

With her left hand gently embracing the boy who wasn't even letting out a single groan and holding her beloved naginata in her right, the gravekeeper stepped forward.

“The gravekeeper's job? Ah, I'm done with that. This town won't need a cemetery anymore. So I, the gravekeeper, am being relieved of my post.”

She discarded her old duty. The commands given to her in the distant past could not hold back her hatred.

“Well then, shall we go? This time for sure, I'll make you happy.”

And so the gravekeeper set foot into the outside world.

She cut down every person on sight, adding them to the ranks of the dead following her.

“جمع الأموات أرواح، كوروكي من آلهة” (O black goddess, please grant upon all the souls of the dead...) ”

She sang and sang her song that revived the dead.

She wouldn't let the dead sleep.

The resurrected dead, in their pain, resented and hated those who still breathed and stretched out their arms to add them to their filthy ranks.

“الأبد دية ال تعذيب إعطاء (Eternal torture.) ”

More and more dead were revived.

Life disappeared from the town, replaced by the false life of undeath.

“لها نهاية لا ال ظلام في غارقة ي رجى (And submerge them in the endless darkness.)”

The march of death continued on and on.

Their destination was the center of the town, the most populated area. They searched for the souls of the highest nobles.

The dead knew no fear. They never faltered in their footsteps, even when facing high walls, deep moats and rows of sturdy soldiers.

“ال عالم نهاية (O world, come to an end.)”

That town, while part of this world, also became a part of the other world.

A country of the dead, a paradise for the deceased.

And the song that was heard at the summit of this hell was -

“Ah, you finally sang with me.”

The duet of the gravekeeper and the boy.

Thus, Merry rises.

The cursed melody that undoes death itself reawakens her will, and she stands once more due to the black magical power she receives from her master Kurono.

Her open eyes are an ominous, shining crimson. Her bloodstained mane stands up like a blazing flame. Her damaged body is stained with a deep darkness that fills in every wound.

Merry is no longer a mere horse. But that does not mean that she has become a low-level Zombie horse.

She has a magnificent figure with a sinister red-black aura radiating from her entire body. Even the hairs of her body stand up on end and give off her malicious intent.

She has not been simply resurrected. She has been reborn as a more powerful creature.

As for her title, it is the same as the one that has been given to her master - She has now evolved into a high-level Undead monster, the [Nightmare.]

<TLN: This is a wordplay with "nightmare" and "mare", the word for female horse. The kanji below "nightmare" read "Undead horse.">

CHAPTER 327

THE COST OF ACTIONS

Facing the enormous group of monsters attacking at daybreak, the supreme commander, Third Prince Wilhart Tristan Spada, gives orders that echo out to the three hundred academy students that he leads.

“Everyone, to your battle stations!”

Wilhart is suffering from sleep deprivation due to the previous repetitive, intermittent attacks. His eyes are slightly bloodshot, with subtle shadows beneath them.

But with the great danger closing in on them in front of his eyes, he raises his voice with all his strength and his shouts show no signs of his fatigue.

Since he does not possess strength like that of Wing Road, he knows that all he can do is take command and ensure that the morale does not drop, so he desperately encourages those he is in charge of.

“If we can weather this attack, surely the Knights' Order of Spada, my father, the great King Leonhart, will come here and rescue us!”

Even with their bodies trembling in fear, the academy students take up their weapons and begin to move.

The Archers and Mages as well as the Swordsmen and Warriors take up their positions, anticipating the monsters climbing onto the ramparts.

“Don't be hasty! The enemy is still far off, make sure they draw closer before you attack!”

The endless rows of enemy silhouettes are slowly climbing upward from the foot of the hill towards the fortress. Like ants swarming around a cake, they close in from every direction.

Are the monsters taunting them or just moving at a slower pace for the less mobile monsters? Either way, it is clear that within the next half hour, all of the different kinds

of monsters are going to surge in at once to disrupt the students' ranks.

“You've even brought some fighting power in the air... Greed-Gore, does this mean that you've finally decided to go all-out?”

The outlines of flying monsters like Pegasus and Harpies can be seen dotting the gray, cloud-filled sky.

The conspicuously large one is the Salamander, perhaps?

“This is a critical situation...”

Since commands are sent to the subordinates as electromagnetic waves via the airborne monsters, it is not simply that the flying monsters have joined the fray; the larger problem at hand is that the general of the army has stepped in to take direct command over it.

The sporadic attacks over the past few days have caused fatigue for the academy students, including Wilhart, but haven't caused any casualties.

The Greed-Gore probably left just enough monsters positioned around the fortress so that nobody could escape, but didn't give them any direct orders after that.

That is why there were lapses in its control over the monsters and some of them approached the fortress carelessly only to be shot down.

Seeing the monster army well-organized under its general's command once more, Wilhart is confident that this is the case.

Therefore, he imagines that the coming attack is going to be harsh.

The phrases "worst case scenario" and "annihilation" pass through his mind.

“No, it will be fine. I'll believe in Father, in Kurono. And we have Wing Road here as well.”

Telling himself that, he desperately tries to make his brain think.

Wing Road is the important core of their combat strength; they are equivalent to a hundred soldiers. He must not be careless in giving them instructions.

“Firstly, Nero and Kai are the vanguard. So I'll put them at the main gate.”

He would have them defend the fortress's front gate, where the attack would be the most concentrated.

Not only are they strong, but simply having those two fight on the front lines will improve the rest of the students' morale.

“I'll have Safiel cover the back and the whole outer circumference of the fortress.”

Her strength lies in the number of servants that she controls.

Since the attack is coming from all directions, it would be impossible to tell where the line of defense might suddenly break.

It would be too risky to use Nero and Kai in such an emergency, since they are the strongest among the students. Relying on her Undead Soldiers would better allow them to maintain their battle formations.

“My dear sister Sharl, I shall rely on thee for our anti-air attacks.”

For some reason, he refers to only his younger sister in a pompous tone during his inner monologue, but the role he assigns to her is appropriate.

Her signature move is her lightning attack magic, but its wide area of effect makes it dangerous as it could hit her allies. However, if aimed at targets in the air, there would be no need to worry about friendly fire and so she could fire away to her heart's content.

Also, firing sporadic magical attacks and arrows at the enemies coming at them from the sky wouldn't be effective.

Unless the arrows were fired all at once and area-of-effect magic was used, they wouldn't deal any meaningful damage to the airborne threats.

“Alright, this is the perfect arrangement!”

Just as Wilhart finishes gathering his thoughts, he spots Nero among the sea of students who are walking back and forth.

“Oi, Ne-”

“Oi, Will! You haven't seen Sharl, have you?!”

In that very moment that Wilhart heard Nero call out to him first, an unpleasant feeling spreads throughout his entire body -



As the enormous army of monsters closes in, the students are gathered around the fortress's main gate, causing a commotion.

“H-h-how can this be...”

In the center of them is Wilhart with all the color drained from his face, cold sweat dripping off his chin like a waterfall.

“It seems that it's true.”

Standing with him is Nero, a rare look of impatience set on his handsome face.

“Sharl has... left the fortress to defeat the Greed-Gore...”

At first, Wilhart wanted to think that this was some kind of joke.

But it has now been confirmed that Charlotte cannot be found anywhere in the fortress.

“I apologize. I told Sharl that I found the Greed-Gore. I didn't think that she would go out recklessly by herself.”

Safiel Maya Hydra is lowering her head with a pained expression.

Sharl, who obstinately advocated for the Greed-Gore's extermination, discovered its location.

And right now, she is nowhere to be seen in Iskia Fortress.

Any fool could have foreseen that she would act like this, though the most foolish one is Charlotte herself.

“I'll go and bring her back right now.”

Nero speaks not a single word of blame towards Charlotte, the cause of this problem, or Safiel who helped make these events happen. He simply steps forward with a swish of his red cape.

His serious expression is full of determination to rescue his party member, companion and childhood friend.

Its intensity naturally parts the crowd, opening up a path for Nero to walk through, but -

“Stop right there! I will not allow you to go after Sharl!”

Wilhart stands in front of him with both arms raised, blocking his path.

“Out of my way, Will.”

Nero speaks with a cold, almost murderous tone.

Its intensity causes Wilhart to falter for a moment, but he raises his voice to respond.

“Nero, you know what's going to happen if you leave the fortress as well, don't you? Look! The entirety of the enemy army is closing in on us!”

“So what?”

“Are you saying that you will abandon us, all three hundred students here?!”

“So then, are *you* telling me that we should abandon Sharl?”

In response to this retort, Wilhart's voice falters once more. No, even his breathing falters.

After several seconds of silence, he finally comes to an answer.

“... Give up on Sharl.”

“And you call yourself her aniki, you bastard?!”

As Nero roars in anger, his tightly-clenched right fist strikes a heavy blow into Wilhart's cheek.

With a pitiful groan, Wilhart's body flies briefly through the air before he falls in an unsightly way onto his hands and knees.

“Will!”

Among the students who are just standing and watching the events unfold, only one of them rushes over to Wilhart's side.

“S... Stay back... Simon.”

Though he is still on the ground, Wilhart holds up his right hand to stop his friend from coming any closer.

“But -”

“It's fine... Please... step back.”

Simon is holding his rifle in his hands.

In the worst case scenario, he might point its barrel at Nero out of anger.

Wilhart wants to avoid that at all costs. The only one who has to be knocked down into this humiliating state is him, who bears the pathetic title of “delusional prince.”

But thanks to the loyalty of his small friend, Wilhart finds the strength to raise his body up from the ground.

The punch from the Rank 5 adventurer was certainly devastating, but even so, he unsteadily gets onto his feet.

“I won't say it again, Will.”

“Sharl is my precious younger sister... But Sharl, Charlotte Tristan Spada, is a member of the royal family. By acting on her own, she has exposed everyone else to danger. Are you saying that the cost of her actions should be the lives of the three hundred students here?! There is no way that I can accept that!”

“... Is that all you wanted to say?”

The rage that burned in Nero's eyes when he punched Wilhart is gone, and now a much colder gaze pierces through Wilhart.

Ignoring the person standing in his way, Nero simply walks past him - or so it appears, but as his shoulder line up with Wilhart's, he opens his mouth and lets out a huge sigh.

“I'll save Sharl, and I'll save everyone here. That'll be fine, right?”

He slowly speaks these words to Wilhart.

“If I defeat the Greed-Gore, everything will be resolved, right?”

“... Yeah.”

Still looking down at the ground, Wilhart nods his head.

“Sorry, but you'll have to hold out for a little while without us.”

Nero continues speaking as he heads towards the main gate that is opening.

In front of him is Kai Est Galbraith atop his Bicorn mount with a greatsword on his back, holding the reins of the prince's Unicorn in his hand.

Waiting beside him is Safiel, who has mounted her false Sleipnir and prepared for departure.

“Well then, we'll be back.”

Thus, the fortress's front gate opens.

Just before Nero mounts his dazzling Unicorn and departs in the direction of the monster army -

“I beg you, Nero! Please save Sharl, please save my sisteeer!”

Wilhart kneels down on the ground and screams this request to him.

With his forehead touching the dirty stone pavement, in an unsightly way that no

member of royalty should do, he begs for the rescue of his family member.

“Yeah, leave it to me.”

Nero turns around briefly to make this declaration before making a spirited departure through the gate with his two companions.

A great cheer rises from the students remaining in the fortress.

Princess Charlotte will be rescued. The Greed-Gore will be defeated. The party of heroes, [Wing Road] , will be able to accomplish these goals - seeing Nero depart to save his companion with no hesitation, the students believe this from the bottom of their hearts.

“This is... fine...”

Wilhart whispers this to himself as the fatigue that has accumulated over the past few days, and even the fear of facing the enemies closing in on them is blown away by the sound of the students' cheering voices.

With his forehead still touching the ground, so that nobody can see - he is crying bitter tears.

“This is... all I can do.”

It would have been impossible for him to stop Nero. That much is certain. He had given up on that from the start - no, he had taken it into account.

Will had to think about the unrest and plummeting morale of the remaining students that would be caused by Wing Road's departure.

In such a state, with this army of students whose main force is now gone, the fortress would fall in less than half an hour and they would head straight down the path leading to annihilation.

So he had to at least preserve their morale.

Yes, no matter how unsightly, miserable and foolish he looks.

He had the pitiful role of making the heroes that are leaving to stand up against the

enemies that endanger his companions look brave and honorable.

However, he had to do it. Nobody but him could have done it.

If he didn't make the greatest performance out of Wing Road's departure, the students would have simply lost all hope without understanding why Wing Road were leaving.

He even stopped Simon from stepping in to prevent Nero from appearing to be a villain, even for a moment.

And so his plan succeeded.

Rather than decreasing, the students' morale has increased.

In this situation, Nero acted as a shining beacon of hope for the students.

That is why this was for the best, all of it.

"This is... This is..."

But tears do not stop flowing from Wilhart's golden eyes.

How unsightly. How ridiculous. Has there ever been any royal family member of Spada to display such disgraceful behavior?

On this day, Wilhart has taken his own pride as royalty and smashed it to pieces with his own hands.

CHAPTER 328

THE LAZY GENERAL

“I wonder if I can really get Nero to follow me out here...”

Charlotte, who left Iskia Fortress alone last night, is hiding beneath the Wrath-Pun's enormous body in a thicket, taking shelter from the rain that began pouring down as the sun rose.

Although she wouldn't be alone for long, how long has it been since she last came to a dungeon by herself?

Charlotte has absolute confidence in her own ability, but she is also a young girl; she gets lonely when on her own.

She wants for her companions, for Nero, to hurry and chase after her.

But as if to refuse to admit that, she begins complaining under her breath.

“Jeez, if this doesn't work, I won't forgive Safi.”

The plan to force the extermination of the Greed-Gore was formed by none other than the prodigy child of the Hydra house, who prides herself on her unrivaled ingenuity.

According to her, if Charlotte left the fortress on her own, Nero would surely come after her to save her, as he is not the kind to easily abandon his companions.

As Safi said these words with a serious expression, Charlotte had listened with slowly reddening cheeks.

To think that that lazy Nero would do something for her sake -

“I-it's not like I'm happy about it or anything!”

With this mysterious way of hiding her embarrassment, Charlotte pounds her fists against the red-furred arm next to her.

The Wrath-Pun's long ears are drooping as if to say that it is troubled, but perhaps this is just a trick of the imagination?

“Still, what's with this Greed-gore guy. It's just lazing about and doesn't seem to have the motivation to do anything...”

Charlotte has already spotted the large black body of the Greed-Gore, sprawled out at the edge of a pond.

These green woods growing thickly over this slightly elevated hill can hide even the Wrath-Pun's enormous body as it lays down, so naturally Charlotte's tiny figure is completely obscured.

This position, with a clear view of the pond, is perfect for observing the enemy.

It has been nearly an hour since Charlotte began hiding here and silently watching the Greed-Gore.

She thought that the general leading a two-pronged attack against both the fortress and the village would be busy giving instructions to its subordinates, but the Greed-Gore didn't do anything apart from the occasional slight movement.

The most it ever did was to push its snout into the pond, still in its sprawled position, to suck up some water.

Charlotte has never seen a monster that gives off such an impression of laziness.

That is why she is letting out words of exasperation.

“Could it be that I could even defeat it by myself...?”

She gets the feeling that if she fired her greatest, most powerful lightning magic at it from here, things would be settled.

Charlotte at least understands that if Wing Road were to leave the fortress as well, the students' capability to defend it would drop remarkably.

That is precisely why the Greed-Gore should be brought down as quickly as possible. Yes, if the chance presents itself, she wouldn't need to wait for Nero's arrival.

“... I might get to see Nero get fired up for once, so I won't.”

As she comes to this decision, something changes in her view of the pond.

“That's a flock of Silent Sheep...”

The Silent Sheep with their characteristic black wool approach in an organized row.

There are ten, twenty - the row stops at thirty Silent Sheep. This is fortunate for Charlotte, who may have fallen asleep if she continued counting them.

As if their master has summoned them, they head towards the Greed-Gore.

“Why are just the Silent Sheep...?”

The Greed-Gore's laziness is strange, but the thing that makes Charlotte more uncomfortable is that there are no monsters from the pond in this place.

She expected there to be other generals or subordinates, or even Centaurs, Orcs or other suitable monsters to be guarding the surrounding area, but the Greed-Gore has been alone until the appearance of these Silent Sheep.

Is it about to give them a direct order? Just as Charlotte wonders if this is the case -

“It ate them?!”

The Silent Sheep are devoured.

No, to be more accurate, they are going forth to be devoured.

The Greed-Gore is still sprawled out, and merely raises its enormous jaw.

The fatty mutton simply leaps into its open mouth.

Its sword-like, sharp fangs grind loudly against each other to chew the Silent Sheep whole, black wool and all.

“I suppose the parasite allows it to guide them into its mouth...”

It seems that the Silent Sheep have not been eaten out of pure coincidence.

One by one, the Silent Sheep are leaping into its gaping jaws.

It is different from a bird feeding its chick. The prey is forcing its own way into the Greed-Gore's mouth.

Just how lazy is this monster?

An indescribably unpleasant feeling rises up in Charlotte's heart.

A chill passes through her body as the Greed-Gore lets out a belch at the end of its meal that reeks of blood.

Charlotte unconsciously tries to avert her eyes, but as her vision shifts horizontally, she catches a glimpse of a purple flicker.

If she were to observe carefully, she would see that this purple flash is coming - no, gushing forth from the Greed-Gore's jaws.

It is not simply a light shining around its mouth, but snakes around a meter in length.

A number of snakes made of purple lightning equal to the number of the sheep that disappeared into the Greed-Gore's stomach are now slithering out through the crevices between its fangs.

“Those must be the body segments of the parasite.”

It cannot be said for certain whether they are the same ones that infested the sheep that were eaten or whether new parasites have been born, but that isn't what Charlotte is currently concerned about.

Now that the Greed-Gore has eaten all of those Silent Sheep, it is alone in this place once more.

It has released these parasite body segments, who is it going to infest next -

“?!”

In the next moment, the Greed-Gore's violet eyes look directly into Charlotte's golden ones.

Their eyes have met - no, that can't be.

Charlotte wants to deny that possibility, but the thirty parasite-snakes that were released are now slithering their way up the hill, directly towards her.

The flickering purple lines heading towards her are just like light-type magical attacks with a self-guided targeting function.

“Kuh, it knew I was here from the very start...”

Charlotte has been meticulously cautious up until this point to avoid being detected by monsters.

She found an appropriate gap to escape the monsters' surround on the fortress and used wind magic to erase her scent and the sound of her footsteps.

However, given the current situation, the fact that she has been detected is undeniable.

“Jeez, it's your fault for being so big!”

Hitting Wrath-Pun's arm with her wand in anger, Charlotte stands up boldly as there is no point in hiding any longer.

“Nero hasn't arrived yet... This leaves me no choice, I'll face you alone!”

With her red twin-tails and cape fluttering, Charlotte leaps out of the woods in high spirits.

Though facing a Rank 5 adventurer full of fighting spirit, the Greed-Gore remains lying at the side of the pond.

The princess of Spada is a little irritated.

“Hmph, you can stay there and act like you're calm if you want to -”

She decides on her plan of attack immediately.

It is the same plan that she thought of earlier and immediately discarded - in other words, the plan to fire her strongest lightning magic and settle this with a single attack.

And so, Charlotte holds up her beloved [Crimson Bolt] and raises her voice.

She shouts the name of the god that grants her the magical power befitting of a Rank 5 adventurer.

“Come forth and roar, red lightning [Reinhardt!] ”

CHAPTER 329

THE BATTLE TO DEFEND ISKIA VILLAGE (1)

As thunder echoes and heavy rain descends upon Iskia Village, so too does a large army of monsters.

“Uooooooooh –”

The one swinging an enormous metal rod around at the village’s west gate is Gustav, who leads the forces fighting to defend it.

The manifestation of the divine protection of the [Scorching Ogre King – Agni Aura*] has caused his pure-red body to be surrounded by a brightly-burning fiery aura and become even redder.

<TLN: Agni means fire and is the god of fire in Indian religions>

With a truly Ogre-like expression, he faces the enemy that is coming directly towards him – a Dortoth with an armed Orc riding it.

The ferocious Dortoth’s huge body resembles a mixture of an elephant and boar, and its most powerful attack is a direct charge. As this attack is about to land on Gustav –

“– Break Impact!”

A full, home-run swing catches the Dortoth’s head.

The fire element is added to the blow due to the overflowing scorching aura. The impact of the blow and the resulting fiery explosion blow the monster away despite its enormous size and tremendous weight.

The Orc riding it is thrown into the air, and unable to brace himself for a landing, drops head-first into the ground. His neck bends in a direction that it most certainly shouldn’t.

The corpse of the Dortoth, whose head has been completely obliterated, flies several dozen meters into the air, but its journey comes to a halt. It crashes onto the ground,

crushing the Slimes and Goblins underneath.

“This is bad, real bad...”

Gustav begins complaining.

He has managed to prevent the Dortoth’s battering-ram-like charge from connecting with the village’s gate that has been tightly shut.

This is the fourth time that he has managed to do so since this battle began.

The large, faint shadow appearing on the other side of the curtain of heavy rain clearly tells him that the fifth charge attempt is imminent.

“S’pose I’m reachin’ my limit...”

As he glances sideways, he sees his reliable party members in the midst of a fierce battle.

“Nooo! Ganging up on me like this, you’re all planning to assault me, aren’t you?! Just like in those erotic novels!”

The one mowing down the hordes of Centaurs with a long poleaxe, while wearing a shocking pink suit of armor and helmet, is the Minotaur (♂) Douglalas. Also known as Lala.

While screaming in a manly bass voice a sentence that a young girl might cry when confronted by a group of rough-looking men, he utilizes the strength that all members of his race are blessed with to swing his axe in a remarkable fashion, butchering the enemies one after another.

“You want my body really badly, don’t you?! But you can’t have it, because even though I look like this, I’m the type of maiden to stay pure until I meet someone I love! URAAAAAAAH!”

Douglalas steps over the corpses of the Centaurs to deliver his deadly attacks to the huge Land Dragon approaching him.

His prided poleaxe has been improved over his long years as an adventurer using the raw materials from the monsters he defeated. In the moment he swings it, a dark gray

aura surges from his body.

This is the proof that he has received a divine blessing from the [Trembling Raging Horned Bull – Bullbros.]

Its effect is vibration. The gray blade with a heart engraved into it lets out a sharp ring as it is swung.

Not only does the axe disintegrate the Land Dragon's quadrupedal body into tiny pieces, it also pulverizes the ground in a radius of over a dozen meters. Of course, the bodies of the monsters unlucky enough to be standing in that area turn into a bloody mist as the high-frequency vibrations pass through them.

Douglalas has cleared the monsters in front of him with a single swing, but his body stiffens slightly following this all-out attack.

The Harpies flying through the rain haven't missed this opportunity. Their harsh, piercing cries echo out as they descend upon him along with the incessant raindrops falling from the sky.

There are three of them. It seems they haven't lost their ability to work together despite being controlled by the parasite; they show no signs of clumsiness such as crashing into each other in mid-air.

At the moment their sharp talons are about to assault Douglalas's head, a whirlwind of steel appears.

“– DAAAH!”

Its origin is the Cyclops whose body is even larger than Douglalas's. The battleaxes in his hands mow down the Harpies that are attempting a surprise attack on his companion.

Their richly-colored wings fall from the air along with bright-red splashes of blood.

“Ah, that was close.”

“Oh my, thank you, Gon-chan. I'll have to thank you with a smooch later~”

“That's not necessary.”

“Getting so shy, you still act like such a child!”

With incredible awkwardness, Gon averts his single large eye and charges into the group of monsters once more.

Perhaps because of his young age, he has not received a divine blessing yet. However, he is number one in the party when it comes to pure physical strength.

He swings the unrefined battleaxes that he is holding in both hands with abnormal strength, completely focused on cutting down the enemies before him. His dual-wielded battle-axes that push his strength to the limit blow through the battlefield like a whirlwind, piling up monster corpses around him.

“Those two’re fine, but the other one’s in trouble.”

Thanks to the powerful members of the [Iron Demon Brigade] displaying their strength as a Rank 5 party, the battle is proceeding well – or so it appears at first glance, but Gustav is all too aware that the frontlines will break down very soon.

It is the sheer number of enemies, the overwhelming difference in the military resources available. Even though the enemies mostly consist of Rank 1 monsters, with these numbers, even the Slimes alone pose a Rank-5-level threat.

The adventurers and vigilantes are truly fighting well.

But it’s not enough; they don’t have enough soldiers or manpower.

Each ally falling accelerates the rate at which the difference in military strength grows further apart.

For now, the Swordsmen and Warriors are still fighting, the Archers haven’t run out of arrows yet and the Mages’ spells are still potent.

However, within the next half hour, fatigue will set in and their attacks will grow weaker. By that time, their numbers will have decreased considerably.

When that happens, this tsunami of monsters will swallow the village whole.

If they wish to fall back, now is the time, but there is nowhere to run.

This west gate is not the only place where battle is occurring.

Iskia Village is already completely surrounded; even now, there are monsters climbing over the stone walls –

“Bad news! The east gate has been breached! Monsters are entering the village!”

It seems that Iskia Village’s defenses have crumbled.

“The Knights’ Order didn’t make it, huh...”

They should be close. But the half-day – no, few hours that the knights would take to arrive is time that they don’t have.

With this number of monsters, it won’t take even a single hour for every one of the ten thousand people in Iskia Village to be eaten alive.

Even with the monsters being controlled by the lightning parasites inside their heads, it makes no difference.

“– Head, small monsters such Goblins and Slimes have made their way inside.”

Gustav hears the robotic voice of Zedra, the Golem Archer that is firing arrows with Mythril arrowheads at the enemy.

As a Rank 5 party, each member is equipped with a magic item that allows telepathic communication.

However, the only one capable of relaying information effectively is Zedra; it’s not very useful on the Cyclops and Minotaur fighters who seem to have brains made of muscle tissue.

“We’re not moving any men from here! We’ll leave the defense inside the village to the “backup soldiers”!”

“Backup soldiers” sounds promising, but in reality, they are made up of young boys with no experience in battle and old men whose strength has long since declined.

Of course, there was no way these men could be sent to the frontlines; Gustav had no intention of doing so, but in this situation, there is no choice but to have them fight.

“Don’t worry about the Rank 1 – no, even up to Rank 2 monsters, just make sure to stop the really big ones from gettin’ inside!”

“Roger.”

Even if it were to turn into a bloody battle on the village’s streets, they have no choice but to fight as hard as they can.

If they can delay just a little longer until the Knights’ Order arrives, they should be able to save at least half the village.

It is already certain that there will be heavy losses. However, they must do everything they can to save as many lives as possible.

“Even though I say that... We’re reachin’ our limits here as well.”

The west gate that faces the Dungeon is where most of the monsters are coming from, and where the battle is the fiercest.

Although all the members of the [Iron Demon Brigade] have gathered here, they have their limits.

Their strength should be praised for managing to hold the village with its weak defensive equipment up until now.

However, Gustav can’t help but to think... If there were one more Rank 5 adventurer party here, they might be able to turn the tides and force the monster army back.

“Hah, am I a fool or what! Ain’t no way something so convenient could happen.”

The only thing adventurers have is the harsh reality that life and death come hand in hand.

“It’s the Salamander! The Salamander is here!”

Indeed, the worst news arrives with the worst timing.

Gustav looks up to see the unmistakable crimson body of the creature that can be recognized at first glance.

With the rain beating against its powerful wings, it begins a nose dive, flames curling around its tongue as if it might unleash its crimson breath at any moment.

If this attack isn't stopped, it is possible that it will break down the frontlines – as this prediction flashes through his mind, Gustav shouts a command.

“Zedra! Stop it, even if it's just for three seconds!”

He will do something about it during those three seconds.

With the scorching divine blessing surrounding Gustav's body, he would be able to block the fire directly using his own body. He might even be able to make it through the Salamander's breath to land a blow on its head.

Either way, if the Salamander comes close to the ground to deliver a rain of fire at point-blank range, he will need to stop it.

And so Gustav believes. He believes that the Rank 5 Archer Zedra, with his unparalleled accuracy, will create an opening for him.

“– There is no need for that. Please fall back immediately.”

However, the voice that he heard over the communication device is not the usual “Roger”, but the lovely sound of a young woman's voice.

“What?!”

Who is that? And more importantly, what is happening?

This is a situation where every second is precious, but Gustav spares a moment to glance back at the tower on which Zedra should be pulling back the string of his bow.

“W-what...?”

He sees an enormous, glowing, golden fireball.

The pouring rain is evaporating from its surface; he can see the water vapor rising from it even at this distance. Or rather, the air above the fireball appears to be distorted.

In the rain, this object that is emitting incredible amounts of heat and light resembles a radiant sun.

And the one who created it, standing directly beneath the golden sunlight streaming down, is a witch dressed in black with her staff raised high in the air.

“Everyone, this is quite dangerous, so fall back please.”

The witch’s voice is but a whisper; the fact that it echoes across the entire battlefield is likely due to magical amplification.

At this moment, everyone on the battlefield has no choice but to acknowledge and obey this order to retreat.

There is not a single person here who does not realise that this fireball is about to be launched.

“Everyone, RUN!”

Giving an order that sounds like a scream, Gustav makes his own retreat back towards the gate.

As the fighters at the frontlines begin to scatter like spiders –

“– [Golden Sun – Aur Soleil.] ”

The witch throws the sun.

CHAPTER 330

THE BATTLE TO DEFEND ISKIA VILLAGE (2)

“Bad news! The east gate has been breached! Monsters are entering the village!”

As Nachim hears this news, he begins to grumble.

“Ah, shit, it’s hopeless, it’s over... Damn it, it’s all that guy, Kurono’s fault... He’s a pest, people die wherever he goes, everyone’s going to die...”

This is the final line of defense to protect the villagers gathered at the center of the village – with that said, it is merely a simple barricade, hardly a reliable defense.

Nachim is standing here with a sword in his hand as one of the backup soldiers.

On his right is a young boy who is holding a sword for the first time in his life, fidgeting nervously. On his left is a withered old man staring into space with a spear in his hand, who would be better off lying in bed.

They don’t have any kind of fighting ability. They weren’t supposed to be fighting in the first place.

The men with at least a little battle experience make up the front line, standing against the wall and desperately fighting back the monsters.

The only reason Nachim himself is here is because he is better at backline support such as equipment distribution and relaying messages rather than fighting on the frontlines.

The one leading this group is a young knight from Spada who was assigned here in Iskia Village just this spring.

Still not even accustomed to the splendid red armor that he is wearing, he gives off a great sense of inexperience.

The older knights, his senpais, should still be fighting hard at the east gate that was breached just a little while ago.

“I’m not going to die here... in a place like this...”

He has to run.

Yes, just like that time he encountered the monster with the form of a little girl, without looking back at the villagers, his companions or even his family, he’ll run away as fast as I can.

That’s how he survived.

Because he held his breath and desperately hid in the Galahad mountain range, he was able to survive and arrive in Spada.

“I’m not going to die...”

However, the crucial escape path is nowhere to be found this time round.

The village is so tightly surrounded by the monsters that there isn’t even an opening for a single mouse to escape.

In the end, he has no choice but to stay here and endure this battle.

“Hyii! The monsters are here!”

“Fohohoho, those are Goblins, are they not? When I was young, I often saw them in the mountains –”

“C-calm down, everyone! Let’s get our weapons ready!”

On the other side of the curtain of pouring rain, there are small, faint silhouettes.

With the monsters finally upon them, unrest spreads among the soldiers – no, it would be more appropriate to call them villagers.

The boy on the right is gripping his sword’s handle with a face that looks like he’s about to cry, and the old soldier on his left is engrossed in recollections of his youth.

Just how many of these men are obeying the order of this unreliable knight that is leading them?

“Shit, damn it... We can do it, even I can defeat monsters like Goblins...”

Nachim finally unsheathes his longsword.

It is the item that his father sent him when he assumed the position of self-appointed chief.

It isn't a magical weapon, but it is made of high-quality steel; a step up from the average longsword.

He has even defeated Goblins in the Fairy Garden before; there is no way that he cannot do the same now.

“Uwah! Th-there are a lot of them!”

“This is like a Slime fever, isn't it?”

“So many...”

The number of monsters visible on the other side of the street is growing larger and larger.

At first, there is only a single Goblin.

And then some Slimes appear, and then more Slimes and even more Slimes after that – and as a hundred Slimes come into view, a group of Goblins appears to reinforce them.

There are a lot of them, but fortunately, they are all still Rank 1 monsters.

Even amateurs could defeat them if they landed an attack, but –

“Uwah, w-what are they doing out there, even letting Orcs inside the village...”

The Orcs' muscular bodies can be spotted here and there, mixed in among the Slimes and Goblins.

Even that single battleaxe-wielding Orc over there could possibly wipe out every one of these backup soldiers that cannot even be called soldiers.

His overwhelming presence makes it easy to imagine.

“This is impossible...”

With the monsters coming from across the road, from the side paths, from beneath the shadows of the houses, absolutely everywhere – Nachim’s heart breaks before the fighting even begins.

Nobody can blame him. All of these people gathered here, who have no business being in a battle, are likely feeling the same despair.

“Th-they’re coming!”

The monsters finally begin charging in all at once.

The Goblins run down the alleys with nimble footsteps. The Slimes crawl onwards along the ground and across the walls of the houses.

And the Orcs give a roar ferocious enough to make the soldiers’ body hair stand on end as they charge in.

With such enemies before them, the backup soldiers simply grip their weapons, unable to take even a single step.

“... It’s over.”

It is impossible. There is no way that these men would be able to stop the monsters’ attack.

They will be slaughtered without even putting up a fight. As the reality of this dead-end scenario sinks into Nachim’s mind –

“– Meteor Strike.”

Light pours down from the sky.

A beautiful mass of light shining in seven colors.

It is as if the great rainbow that one would expect to see after this rain stops has been compressed into a spherical shape.

A large magic circle of light is drawn upon the canvas of dark gray rainclouds covering the sky. Nachim realizes that this rainbowy mass has spilled forth from here.

And then it flies down to crash upon the monsters, leaving a seven-colored trail behind it.

His eyes are blinded by the white light. His ears are deafened by a roaring explosion. He doesn't know what has happened.

This chaotic period of time feels very long, but in reality, it all happens in a single instant.

When Nachim opens his eyes again, the monsters that had been closing in on them just a moment ago are gone, without a single trace or shadow left of them.

In their place is a colossal crater left in the ground's surface.

"Ah! There's something in the sky!"

"Hoh, that looks quite like the Fairy that I saw in the forest when I was a child –"

Where the boy is pointing with an expression that shows surprise at the fact that the senile old man is right, is a Fairy wrapped in a flickering, pale green light.

As everyone looks up, they begin to realize that there is a young woman with long hair inside the faint sphere of light.

And the only one who knows her name is Nachim.

"That's... Lily-san..."

It is unlikely that she is responding because her name has been spoken.

However, with a flutter of her two pairs of wings, the Fairy that has just annihilated the monsters in a single attack descends towards the frontline of backup soldiers.

"W-who are –"

The young knight representing the kingdom of Spada tries to ask for the identity of the beautiful, shining Lily in front of his eyes, but –

“Lily-san!”

Nachim interrupts and jumps out in front of her.

“Hey you, have you seen Kurono, by any chance? I thought he arrived at this village before us.”

Does she remember him or not?

No, she asked Nachim a question with the presumption that he knows who Kurono is; it is likely that she does know him.

“Ah, no... I h-haven’t seen him.”

The answer that comes from his mouth immediately is a lie.

After he speaks, he remembers that the Fairy can read his thoughts.

“As I thought, he went to Iskia Fortress, huh... But with the village surrounded like this, continuing on is... There’s no other choice...”

However, Lily merely begins mumbling to herself; fortunately, she does not seem to be in a bad mood.

“Aah! There are more monsters coming!”

“Those are Centaurs, are they not? A long time ago, Grandma and I went to the Iskia Hills and –”

Of course, the monsters are continuing to pour into the village.

The first wave has been exterminated successfully, but it is clear that they are going to keep on coming.

“Umm, the knight in the red armor over there. You’re in charge here, right?”

“Eh, ah, yes!”

As Lily suddenly speaks to him, the inexperienced knight stutters in his reply.

“I’ll leave three of these here.”

Before he can ask what she is talking about, an incantation that sounds like a small bird’s song comes from Lily’s mouth.

Magic circles of white light are drawn on the ground, similar to the one that appeared in the sky a little while earlier. There are three of them.

“– Ein, zwei, drei, protect this place.”

Though the knight is unfamiliar with magic, he knows that this is some kind of summoning.

From within the magic circles that have a diameter of about two meters, large, Orc-like soldiers appear.

They are wearing white surcoats. Ordinary-looking longswords hang at their waists, but they look remarkably small considering the size of their bodies.

But the thing that draws the most attention is the ominous-looking metal masks that cover their faces.

“Lily-san, what are...”

As Nachim questions her timidly, Lily replies with an expression that is as if she is showing off a newly-purchased accessory.

“ [Living Dead.] My faithful servants.”

Nobody here dares to press her for any more details.

“Well then, I’m going to go help at the east gate.”

“Lily-san, with your power, you should go to the west gate –”

“Ah, that’s already covered.”

Lily gives a wave of her hand, and as if to confirm her words, the sound of an explosion echoes out across the village.

Dense black smoke billows up from beyond the west gate.

“Because my witch friend is going to burn them down nicely.”

CHAPTER 331

THE BATTLE TO DEFEND ISKIA FORTRESS

As dawn breaks, the sounds of battle between man and monster echo out amidst the rain that has begun to pour down.

The ones confined to the old fortress standing at the top of a hill are the elite youngsters that shoulder the future of Spada's military forces, three hundred students from the Royal Spada Academy.

The mixed army of monsters simply closes in on the fortress head-on, employing no surprise attacks or clever schemes.

The students are outnumbered more than three to one as the siege begins, and their fate hangs by a thread.

"Uoooooh! Slash!"

With his longsword, the young knight cadet Eddy cuts down the Orc that has climbed over the fortress's walls in an attempt to get inside.

The Orc's chest is torn apart by Eddy's martial arts just as its upper body protrudes above the top of the wall, and it falls back the way it came.

"Shenna! It's too dangerous here!"

"Even if you say that, where are we supposed to run – [Air Sagita!]"

With a flick of her pale-green pigtails, the bespectacled Mage Shenna fires a magical attack at the enemies below.

She is aiming for a Goblin that is determinedly digging its sharp claws into the gaps between the stones of the wall, climbing its way up.

The blade of air cuts cleanly through its arms and it tumbles head first towards the ground, knocking down its companions on the way.

“Move! The walls will not hold any longer! We are retreating inside the fortress!”

As if answering the earlier question of where to run, the desperate shout of the supreme commander, Second Prince Wilhart Tristan Spada, echoes out.

There is nobody available to relay commands across the battlefield. The general is running around the upper surface of the fortress’s walls, delivering commands to each squad personally.

“Inside the castle... That means this is finally the end, huh.”

The only thing stopping the monsters right now is the waterless moat and the two layers of stone wall.

Around half an hour has elapsed since the battle began, and the pile of monster corpses that have filled up the dry moat threatens to match the height of the vertical stone walls.

The only safe area still left is the [Tenshu*], the part of the fortress that one might call the actual castle.

<TLN: This is a Japanese word for the highest tower inside a castle. Probably the keep.>*

With that said, if the walls are breached, the fortress can be said to have fallen.

Holing themselves up in the Tenshu is little more than a final act of futile resistance – however, the reality is that with the battle’s current situation, they have no other choice.

“Don’t give up, Shenna! We can still fight, I’m sure things will work out somehow!”

But it is not completely hopeless.

Wing Road could defeat the Greed-Gore at any moment, or the elite Knights’ Order of Spada could come to their rescue.

Because they believe this, the students are able to continue fighting.

Despite the fact that they have fallen into the most desperate of situations.

“Oh, if it isn’t my knight Eddy and Shenna. Could I request that you protect me for a short while?”

Wilhart lays his eyes on the pair of students that have formally created a team together and approaches them, asking a question in a way that makes it difficult to tell whether it is an order or a request.

“Affirmative, Your Excellency!”

“But what do you mean, for a short while?”

Eddy gives an immediate answer, while Shenna returns a question of her own.

“The north tower is the last place I need to relay the retreat order to. However, there are already monsters atop the walls; it is far too dangerous for me to venture forth alone.”

“Will it be alright with just the two of us?”

“I cannot afford to take any more with me. Let us hurry!”

With a swish of his red cape that has been dirtied a little by the mud and rain, Wilhart runs off ahead.

“... I can’t tell whether that person is incompetent or very brave.”

Shenna whispers these words so that Wilhart cannot hear them.

Wilhart seemed incredibly useless right before the battle began, to the point that it was unbelievable that he was a prince like Nero.

Shenna would have thought that he would be the kind who would have assigned an excessive number of people as his guards to keep himself safe. But instead, he has read the battle situation properly and is making do with the minimum required protection.

Wilhart has been unpopular ever since he began attending the academy. She can’t quite seem to figure out what kind of person he is.

Is he as much of a failed prince as rumors have it, or is he not as bad as he seems?

“I believe in him. More than that Prince Nero who just abandoned us, anyway.”

Unexpectedly, Eddy stands up for Wilhart.

But this is not a situation where she can ask why exactly he is saying this.

“Shenna!”

“I know!”

Several Goblins who have climbed over the wall and come down into the passages appear in front of them.

The flash of a sword, a blade of wind – and a single, flickering line of fire.

“Hmph, you were fools to stand in my way. Now regret your error in the depths of hell.”

A faint pillar of gunpowder smoke rises from the rifle barrel in Wilhart’s hands.

The bullet fired from it did indeed pierce through one of the Goblins running along the passageway, giving it a swift death.

Speaking in a loud, victorious tone, he steps over the monsters’ corpses and continues along the fortress’s wall.

His two subordinates feel a little uneasy about this. But the firepower of his weapon is undeniable, so they decide to gratefully accept his covering fire.

And so, after repelling the Goblins, Slimes and the occasional Harpy that dives down towards them, the three of them reach the north tower as planned.

Wilhart opens the door forcefully as if he means to kick it down and screams the order to retreat.

“We’re retreating inside the fortress! Abandon the walls! Hurry, Simon!”

The people packed inside this defensive tower consist of several Archers and Mages, as well as Simon Friedrich Bardiel, Prince Wilhart’s friend who has had rumors about him whispered recently.

After firing one last shot from the window, the small sniper exhales and turns around.

“Ah, good, monsters have made it to the first floor and I was wondering what we were going to do.”

Simon gives a forced smile, clutching his long sniper rifle.

Indeed, something that sounds like monsters’ snarls is coming from the floor below. There is a door that leads directly to the stairs, and it is only a matter of time before the monsters attempt to break it down.

The hard stone walls and steel door won’t be broken through so easily, but even so, now is the time to evacuate the tower.

“Hurry, or we will not make it in time.”

In response to Wilhart’s retreat orders, the other students who have been protecting this tower begin moving towards the passageway onto the fortress’s walls.

“... What a terrible injury.”

“Everyone’s used up all their potions.”

Even though they have been attacking from the tower, the monsters have been able to counter-attack as well.

The Centaurs’ arrows were incessant and from time to time a Slime that had climbed its way up the side of the fortress leapt in through a window.

The students’ armor and uniforms are stained here and there with blood.

Even though they have not taken damage, the Mages that have been firing attacks non-stop are now on the verge of being out of magical energy; they are staggering and leaning on their staves as they walk.

Whether due to good luck or exceptional skill, Simon does not appear to have any significant injuries.

Of course, the ones with the heaviest injuries are the first to leave the tower.

The students pass through the door in single file, and the last to leave is Simon.

With that said, there aren't that many of them. It doesn't even take thirty seconds for all of them to leave the tower – or at least, that was supposed to be the case.

“– WAH?!”

The tower shudders violently, and Simon falls with a loud scream.

In the next moment, the metal door swings shut, cutting the tower off from the passageway.

“Simon! Shit, what was th– OWAH!”

Another earthquake-like movement.

As Wilhart stumbles and leans against the edge of the fortress's wall, he realizes that the source of these vibrations is directly below.

“A Dortoth's charge, huh... Damn you...”

There is a rampaging Dortoth intently throwing its huge body against the wall.

It is merely an ordinary part of the wall with no gate or anything of the sort, but the Dortoth charges into it repeatedly as if its parents' sworn enemies are on the other side of it.

Wilhart reloads his rifle to its capacity of five bullets and shoots the reckless monster below.

Five rifle rounds as well as a single, high-caliber sniper rifle round – six bullets in total – pierce the Dortoth's elephant-like skull. The tiny brain that seems capable of only giving the simple order to continue charging is destroyed.

“Hmph, we managed to bring it down...”

Letting out a few satisfied words after shooting down such a large monster for the first time in his life, Wilhart reaches for the closed metal door once more to let his friend out of the tower.

“Muh!”

However, it does not open.

The knob is indeed making a clicking sound as it turns, but the door doesn't budge no matter how hard he pushes or pulls.

It is not difficult to imagine the cause. The earlier vibrations must have warped the door's frame.

“Eh, wait a minute, you're kidding me, right...?”

Through the door comes Simon's shaking voice.

“C-calm down! I'm going to break it down right now, Simon, so stand back! Eddy, help me out!”

From here on out, there is no choice but to rely on manual labor.

Wilhart and Eddy throw themselves into the door with all their might.

“Guh... Shit...”

They repeat this process several times, but the steel door continues to block the entrance, fulfilling its intended role.

“Shit! Shit!”

They cannot afford to waste any more time here. A great sense of impatience drives Wilhart on.

“You still can't get it open?! If you don't hurry, this place is going to be surrounded by monsters as well!”

Shenna is almost screaming.

She and the Archers and Mages that managed to get out of the tower first are busy repelling the monsters that are still climbing onto the walls.

Wilhart doesn't need to be told that there isn't a moment to spare.

But he also understands that with the strength of the people here, they cannot re-open this metal door.

“Will...”

“I-it is fine! This kind of door will certainly open soon!”

“It’s alright.”

“Huh?”

“It’s alright. Leave me behind –”

“DON’T SAY SUCH NONSEEEEEENSE!”

Wilhart screams as if to drown out the weak, utterly hopeless voice coming through the door.

“Don’t say such nonsense, there’s no way I could do such a thing! I, the Second Prince of glorious Spada, would never be able to flee, abandoning my friend!”

He pounds his fists singlemindedly against the metal door. But it still refuses to move even an inch.

“Thank you. But you can’t sacrifice everyone else here for my sake, can you?”

“Kuh...”

Beside Wilhart is Eddy, who is still trying to open the door as if his life depends on it.

When he turns around, he sees Shenna desperately fighting, as well as the several other wounded, anxious-looking students.

“Prince Nero doesn’t have it, but you do, Will... The resolve to leave a companion behind.”

“Simon!”

“Because we’re friends, Will, I think I know a few things about you.”

Wilhart had thought that nobody would know the meaning behind his actions before the battle began.

However, there is one person here who understood his true intentions. One of his friends, who are few in number.

That is all the more reason Wilhart cannot turn his back on that resolve now.

He cannot expose numerous others to danger for the sake of one person.

It's a simple matter of numbers. The easiest of calculations.

"... Forgive me."

"It's alright."

"Forgive me, Simon."

"I said it's alright. Besides, if I hold out a little longer, something might work out."

Simon probably does not even believe in these words of hope, but he must say them nonetheless.

Wilhart can clearly picture the bitter smile that his friend is wearing on the other side of this door.

"Kuh, uu... Forgive me... Forgive me..."

"See you, Will – and tell onii-san that I said I'm sorry."

And so, Wilhart turns back towards the fortress's walls, leaving the sworn friend of his soul trapped in the tower.

While fighting off the monsters that continue to appear, he runs as fast as he can to make his escape.

"Haha... It's over... Everything... is over."

With tears pouring down from his empty eyes, Wilhart points his rifle in the monsters' direction and pulls the trigger.

CHAPTER 332

THE INFLUENCE OF DESPAIR

“See you, Will – and tell onii-san that I said I’m sorry.”

The sound of Simon’s friend screaming words of apology gets further and further away.

With his back pressed against the metal door that refuses to open, Simon collapses onto the ground.

“... There was no other choice.”

As the sounds of the battle that seems like it is in another world echo into this narrow tower, Simon whispers to himself.

“It’s... fine this way...”

He has no regrets about the choice that he made.

If Wilhart had continued trying to open the door, everyone there would have been surrounded by the monsters and retreat would have become impossible.

That is why Simon mustered his courage and told Wilhart to abandon him. He had to say those words that no friend should have to hear.

If he didn’t do this, that kind prince would have regretted his actions for the rest of his life. He would see this moment in his nightmares every night for the rest of his days.

And above all, though their time together was short, Wilhart was Simon’s second ever friend. Simon wanted to at least look manly and brave. He wanted to show an attitude and resolve that would make Wilhart proud to call Simon his friend.

There is not a shred of masculinity in Simon’s appearance; he could easily be mistaken for a girl. Even so, he still has what is known as a man’s stubbornness.

“I-it’s... Uu... Uu...”

However, it took all of Simon's effort to put up that front.

He is different from a proper knight; his resolve to resign himself to death was brittle and short-lived.

Now that he has been left alone, tears won't stop pouring from his eyes and the sound of sobbing comes from his throat.

"I don't want this... I don't want this... Help me, onii-san..."

Simon is crying.

In an unsightly, miserable way, like an infant, he is bawling.

His cute face is a mess and his cheeks are wet from the large tears that flow over them endlessly.

"No, I don't want to die... I don't want to die yet..."

However, as Simon sinks into the depths of despair, a thunderous roar echoes out, bringing him to his senses.

The loud sound of an impact comes not from the door at his back – but another door on the first floor, which the monsters have already occupied.

Through a gap in the warped metal door, he can see an Orc with bloodshot eyes breathing wildly as it swings its mace into it.

"Hyii –"

With the bringer of his death finally appearing before his eyes, Simon's body freezes in terror.

But the life-and-death struggles he has gone through so far have not gone to waste.

Survival instincts kicking in, his body springs into action.

He reaches into the dimensional pouch to pull out the prototype rifle, which joins the sniper rifle [Yata-Garasu Mk. II] that is already in his hands.

The long-barreled Yata-Garasu isn't a very effective choice of equipment in this confined space, but Simon has decided that it is better than not having it.

He loads five rounds into the prototype rifle and attaches his dagger of memories to it as a bayonet; he is as prepared as he can be.

"Seuss-san* protected me... I have to fight... I can't give up, not until the very, very end."

<TLN: This character's name was previously translated as Susu-san.>*

Though his body was trembling in a fear just a moment ago, strangely enough, his composure returns to him as he grips his weapons.

Holding the two firearms in his hands, Simon is no longer an alchemist, but a sniper. He belongs to the Marksman class, whose members shoot down the enemies in their weapons' sights with unparalleled accuracy.

"I'll do my best. Until onii-san comes to rescue me..."

With a renewed will to fight, Simon takes a seated position, raises the prototype rifle and pulls the trigger.

The Orc is still swinging its mace with all its strength, trying to break down the door. A rifle round strikes its head perfectly through the gap in the doorway that it managed to make.

As Simon sees a spray of blood as well as the purple lightning that is the body of the parasite bursting out, he pulls back the bolt on his rifle.

There is no time to feel at ease. Simon can already feel the presence of the next monster that will appear through the gap in the doorway.

The metal door is struck once more. A second Orc has appeared.

But the sound is twice as loud – no, three times.

The Orc is not alone, even the small, weak monsters including a Goblin are cooperating to break down the door.

But the monster that enters the tower is not an Orc or a Goblin.

It is a Rank 1 monster, a Slime with a gel-like body that can change form at will, that squeezes its way in through the tiny gap in the doorway.

Without a moment's delay, a second gunshot echoes against the tower's stone walls.

The bullet eats into the center of the Slime's core, putting a halt to its biological functions.

The dead Slime's jelly-like body collapses, splashing over the floor near the door to become a puddle.

However, he cannot do much more than this.

"Kuh... I can't hit them through the door.."

The first Orc's head happened to be in a good position to shoot at, but the second Orc's body is completely hidden on the other side of the door.

The same goes for the Goblin.

Does Simon have no choice but to fold his arms and wait for the door to be broken?

If the door is knocked down, monsters will flood inside.

If that happens, he won't be able to stop them with just a rifle that can only fire five consecutive rounds.

"If I survive this and make it home, the first thing I'll do is build a machine gun..."

This is now the second time that he is regretting not having a machine gun, the first time being in Alzas.

With no amazing ideas coming to Simon's mind, the door gets closer and closer to its limit.

The only thing he can do now is reload his weapon and pray that the number of monsters that are about to rush in is a number that he can deal with.

"... Here they come."

The door finally flies off its hinges, allowing entry into the tower.

With a mad war cry, the Orc and Goblin who broke down the door step inside.

Fire spouts from the high-caliber [Yata-Garasu Mk. II] in Simon's hands. The round pierces through the chest of the Goblin dashing up the stairs like a monkey and continues onto its original target, the head of the Orc.

He can take down two enemies with a single piercing round – Simon's knowledge of the specs of the weapon he created and his incredibly accurate shot have successfully stalled the enemies.

In order to deal with the next wave of monsters, Simon lets go of the sniper rifle that requires reloading after only one shot, and raises the rifle that has a bayonet attached to it.

As he does so, more Goblins that were apparently waiting behind the Orc leap inside, and another Slime crawls its way across the floor.

But with the gun in his hands, Simon is incredibly composed, aiming at the enemies as indifferently as an ancient Golem soldier.

With relaxed movements, he lines his sights up on a target in less than two seconds and fires the rifle.

The first shot pierces through a Goblin's brow, and the second destroys the Slime's core.

He has three bullets left. The number of enemy shadows he can see on the other side of the door is – four.

“Oh shit!”

As the third bullet hits yet another Slime, Simon stands up.

A prone position is the most stable for shooting, a sitting position is second-best and a standing position is the most unstable.

The reason he has given up this stability and changed to a standing position is because if he doesn't, he cannot deal with the fourth enemy lying in wait.

And that time will be upon him very soon.

The fourth and fifth bullets have already turned the two Windwolves that charged towards him into corpses.

He has zero bullets left.

As if unwilling to give him the time to reload, a Goblin holding a rusty knife dashes in.

It is only a single Rank 1 monster.

But for Simon, who is weak in close-quarters combat, this may as well be the most powerful enemy of all.

Defeating it without his gun is too dangerous – However, there is only one option left, the worst option for a sniper.

“YAAAAAAAAAH!”

He gives a spirited scream as he brandishes his weapon. He has no technique; he simply uses all his strength to thrust his rifle that has now become a short spear.

The lethality of the attached dagger’s white blade is not at all inferior to that of a bullet.

In fact, it is a common weapon of choice for Rank 4 adventurers. Even with Simon’s thin arms, he doesn’t lack the strength needed to pierce through a Goblin’s body.

The difference in reach between a knife and a bayonet decides the victor.

Before the rusty knife reaches Simon’s white, soft skin, his beloved dagger pierces the ugly green body of the Goblin.

“Haah, haah... I did it, Seuss-san...”

Cold sweat forms on Simon’s face as he emerges victorious from this close-quarter battle that he is unaccustomed to. His ears are filled with his own violent heartbeat.

He realizes that this is not a situation where he can relax.

The monsters’ attack on this tower has stopped for now, but more monsters may come

up from the floor below at any moment.

The first thing he needs to do is reload.

He has just shown that as long as he has ammunition, he can stop the advance of several monsters.

“I can do this... I’ll keep this up and survive.”

With a little hope in his heart, he sits down in his original position.

First, the Yata-Garasu that he fired the initial shot with – Simon left it right here, but he can’t find it.

“Eh? Huh?”

There is no way he could have lost it. How can he lose such a large, long-barreled weapon in such a small room?

However, the reality is that he cannot find his favorite gun.

“Huh, why, where has it –”

At that moment, a drop of water lands on the tip of Simon’s nose.

It is still raining outside. Is the roof leaking? No, this isn’t even water.

It is only a single droplet, but it is viscous enough that it feels like it is coiling around his skin. It is like a Slime’s body, but if it really were from a Slime, his skin would be burning from the acid.

There is no pain. Instead, he smells a faint, sweet fragrance.

So what is this? Before he considers this any further, Simon instinctively looks up at the ceiling; seeing it for himself is quicker than trying to figure it out.

“Ah, you’re kidding me...”

There is a mass of writhing, slippery tentacles. This shiny, oily mucus is a natural aphrodisiac. It is a sweet poison that robs the victim of its reasoning.

It came in through the window and took his weapon. But what goes through Simon's mind is not an accurate assessment of the current situation, but the name of this hideous monster.

"... A Morjura."

A well-known Rank 2 monster that everyone does their utmost to avoid contact with. The most horrible, most disgusting rapist.

This number of tentacles is not something that an amateur in close-quarters combat can deal with using some quick wit and a good weapon –

"Wah, ah... No... UWAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

CHAPTER 333

THE BIRTH OF A HERO

Iskia Fortress is currently being consumed by an enormous army of monsters.

Humanoid monsters are climbing over the walls like insects, and the airborne monsters are swarming around like flies.

The fortress gate is tightly shut, but monsters are ramming into it as if they intend to crush their own skulls. How much longer will it hold?

Over a tenth of the students have perished in the battle thus far.

Friendly faces have already started to become assimilated into the enemy army by the repulsive snake-like parasites.

“Haha... It’s over... Everything... is over.”

With an expression of despair on his face, Wilhart’s body moves to pull his rifle’s trigger like a machine.

From on top of the wall, he can see the monsters that have invaded the fortress crawling around.

He can see silhouettes wearing familiar uniforms and suits of armor mixed in here and there among them.

Will Simon become like them too? Wilhart inadvertently imagines the dear friend he left behind being transformed like that.

As his tears fall, a nauseous sensation fills his body.

“Please get a hold of yourself, Your Excellency!”

Eddy, who is running alongside him, shouts at the pale-faced general who looks like his feet may stop at any moment.

“Ah, Eddy... Sorry. I am alright now.”

He can't afford to give everything up just yet.

He's still alive, and the students are still struggling to survive with all their might.

How can he break down here before everyone else? He's the supreme commander, isn't he? Even if everyone else gives up, he must struggle until the very, very end.

“I'm alright, I'm... alright.”

However, as if some cork has been pulled out, his willpower leaks away.

It's impossible, futile. What could he, who is so incapable, possibly do?

The sensation of defeat swirls around inside his chest, fills up his head and eats away at his soul.

Trying to persuade him that there is still hope is a pointless endeavor.

(Ah, that's right –)

Firing his rifle with mechanical movements once more, Wilhart realizes something.

(In the end, I didn't have the resolve to make sacrifices.)

He made an impressive declaration in front of Nero, but now that his friend has been sacrificed before his very eyes, he is in this sorry state.

(Haha, pathetic, how very pathetic. Forgive me, Simon, it seems that I'm not the stout-hearted man that you hoped I was –)

Even as he thinks this, Wilhart pulls back the bolt of his rifle, reloading completely unconsciously – However, with a metallic noise, the sliding movement stops.

He tries two or three additional times, putting more strength into it, but the bolt won't budge.

“This is what's known as a [jam] , huh...”

The round is stuck inside the weapon. The possibility of this happening was known during the weapon's development as a potential flaw, but now that possibility has become reality.

Whether the shell somehow failed to eject or some component of the weapon itself has become warped, he doesn't know.

However, the undeniable truth is that the prototype rifle has now become a piece of junk incapable of firing any more rounds.

"Just like me."

Wilhart's feet finally come to a halt.

He throws the broken rifle away and simply stands on top of the fortress's wall in a daze.

Eddy and Shenna seem to be shouting something at him, but their words don't enter his ears.

What he does hear is the sound of battle that somehow feels so far away, and –

"السلام روح من ال ثاني ال قسم—"

A song.

"... What is this?"

Has the despair finally driven him insane?

"Oi, what is this song?"

"No, it's not a song, it's –"

It seems that Wilhart is not mishearing or having an auditory hallucination. This transparent, beautiful melody is being heard by everyone.

What is it – no, who is singing it?

"– It's a chant!"

Someone is using magic.

“That’s...”

At that moment, Wilhart sees it.

Outside the walls, there is an overwhelming army of monsters swarming around.

However, in the distance, at the foot of the hill upon which Iskia Fortress stands, he can clearly see something black approaching.

“That’s –”

Fiery explosions are appearing amidst the monster army one after another.

Entire groups of Goblins and Slimes are blown away, and pieces of the large Dortoths and land dragons are scattered in all directions.

It is blasting through the enemies in its way, heading straight up the hill towards the fortress.

The single silhouette of a horseman is visible, making an incredible charge through the monsters.

Like a black blade piercing through a dragon’s flesh –

“– KURONO!”

The Nightmare Berserker makes his appearance on the battlefield.



The students on the wall trying to make their retreat inside the fortress become aware of the horseman that has appeared amongst the horde of monsters.

In fact, even in the middle this battle, there is no way that they cannot notice him.

This single horseman is galloping towards them with incredible power, pulverizing the wall of monsters.

As the students fight the monsters on top of the walls, they are more dumbfounded than happy at the appearance of this one-horse reinforcement.

Just who on earth would do such a reckless thing? His form gradually becomes more visible to those of the Marksman and Thief classes that possess good eyesight.

“What is that horse...?”

Someone’s whisper of wonder can be heard.

The horse he is riding is a black horse with splendid physique, like something that a high-ranking officer of Spada might ride – No, judging from its mane that is wavering like an ominous black-red flame, it is no mere horse, but an Undead monster.

The Undead horse that knows no fatigue, able to move with full force forever if it wished, known as the [Nightmare.]

Then who is the one riding this horse?

The black-clothed silhouette atop the horse is wielding a large hatchet and a longsword, and as if those weren’t enough, there are ten bladed weapons of varying shapes surrounding him.

In addition to the large explosions caused by magical attacks, the ten blades floating around in the air swoop down on countless prey of their own accord.

The monsters that manage to pass through the storm of shockwaves and blades to close in on the black knight are cut down in the blink of an eye by the weapons in his hands.

The red blade flashes when an enemy approaches from the right, while the fang-blade flickers black when an enemy approaches from the left.

If one looks closely, they would see that the red-black aura coming from the blades is the same as the one emitted by the horse.

This is undoubtedly the mark of a cursed weapon.

Even at this distance, their voices of resentment can be heard.

The one using a cursed blade to literally open up a way through* despite the overwhelming number of enemies is not a knight, but –

“A berserker.”

Everyone is whispering to themselves.

They look on as he heroically fights his way through, using the most violent methods of combat.

“It’s the Berserker.”

The Nightmare leaps over the mountains of monster corpses that he creates in the blink of an eye.

Is there any cavalry that can match this amazing, terrifying sight? The sight of this insane horse and rider’s bloodbath is enough to freeze one’s spine.

However, when remembering that this horseman is an ally, the students feel more relief than if the elite Knights’ Order of Spada had come to their rescue.

“It’s a berserker riding a Nightmare.”

At the sight of this black light of hope that has arrived in their greatest time of need –

“IT’S THE NIGHTMARE BERSERKER!”

The students are in uproar.

Strength returns to their arms as they continue to swing their swords and draw their bowstrings.

Seeing the reinforcements they had desperately been waiting for, this single horseman, their morale goes up.

“Oi, look, the one riding at the back, isn’t that Princess Nell?!”

The light of their hope grows even brighter.

Behind the black berserker is the beautiful lady with her white wings outstretched.

With that characteristic appearance, it is impossible to mistake her for someone else.

“الأ شرار على ال خام سال حكم ال قسم”

And that means that this beautiful chant that is echoing across the battlefield, perhaps through magical amplification, is that of Nell Julius Elroad.

“We’re saved... We’re going to be saved!”

The Mage-class male student shouts these words, not as just wishful thinking, but because he understands the meaning of this chant.

Even if one does not understand the chant, anyone can feel the great amount of magical energy gathering around her pure-white staff and imagine this to be some great spell that will turn things around.

And as the horse that the Nightmare Berserker and the princess are riding arrives at the fortress gate, the spell that they have been waiting for is about to be cast.

The large monsters that were gathered around the fortress gate are swept away by explosions and cursed blades as the black horseman reaches it.

The Berserker riding the Nightmare turns around, looks up at the castle wall and speaks with a surprisingly calm voice.

“I’ve come to help you, Will.”

In front of his black and red eyes is the Second Prince of Spada, Wilhart Tristan Spada, wearing a somewhat dumbfounded expression.

Before the Berserker hears a reply, he looks to the front once more and prepares for battle.

“Well then, I’m counting on you, Nell.”

“Yes, Kurono-kun –”

Though their exchange is brief, it sounds as if they are a party consisting of a married couple.

Nell replies to Kurono with an earnest expression and waves the white national treasure, the [Scale of White Wings.] The spell to turn the tides of the battle is finally unleashed.

“– [Radiance Exile.] ”



When Nell read in Wilhart’s handwritten request form that the enemies are being controlled by Parasites, she saw a chance at victory.

A typical, student-level Priest can cast at best an intermediate-level spell to remove Status Effects.

Then how about Nell, who is Rank 5 and possesses the divine protection of the [Heaven-Calming Imperial Princess Aria] ?

In addition, with the [Scale of White Wings] that has a power that deviates from modern magic systems, it is possible to use Ancient Magic.

And it is this magic that is finally cast after the chant that is the length of a full song –

“– [Radiance Exile.] ”

It is a super-wide-area Heal that completely removes any mental Status Effects.

An enormous magic circle expands, with Nell’s feet as its center.

The circle drawn in lines of white light contains magical patterns indecipherable in the modern day as well as countless ancient letters of which only a tiny portion can be read.

Even Nell, the caster of the spell that expends nearly half of the gemstones embedded in the [Scale of White Wings], does not understand its true magical meaning. However, thanks to her staff and divine protection, the spell manifests its full effect.

The enormous magic circle, which now completely surrounds the hill upon which Iskia Fortress stands, suddenly begins to glow.

It merely flickers at first, but gradually increases in brightness while pillars of light

reaching towards the sky begin to rise here and there.

The number and individual sizes of these pillars continue to increase – finally, there is simply a single pillar of light with the same diameter as the original circle.

It appears as if it is holding up the sky, shining with a divine light.

“Uwah...”

Everyone inside the pillar is forced to close their eyes due to its brilliance.

However, the only ones with such reactions are the students, who are not affected by a single Status Effect.

The pitiful monsters that were being controlled by the parasites in their brains are writhing and screaming in agony, like Undead being bathed in a purifying light.

No, the ones that are truly suffering are the parasites that had been enslaving them.

Through the nostrils of the screaming Goblins and mouths of the Orcs that are clutching their heads, the lightning-emitting snakes emerge with splashes of blood.

As if the comfortable skulls in which they had made their homes have suddenly become boiling kettles, they desperately twist their bodies to escape.

However, as they abandon the monsters and come into contact with the purifying light outside, they are unable to maintain their forms and disintegrate into small fragments.

In the midst of this heavy rain, like a flash of lightning, like the roar of thunder, they vanish in an instant.

[Radiance Exile] , as the name of the spell suggests, has completely exiled the bodies of the parasites from this world.

How much time has passed since the spell was cast?

It feels like it has been a long time, and yet, it feels like not much time has passed at all. As the students’ senses are dulled by the dazzling light, it comes to an end.

Iskia Fortress returns to its original state, being beaten down on by the rain.

The only difference is that every single one of the monsters that were violently laying siege to the fortress now lies silent on the ground that the rain has turned into mud.

The small Goblins, the robust Centaurs and even the enormous Dortoths have all collapsed.

They do not move an inch. Have they died?

The students hold their breath, and nobody raises their voice. The Iskia Hills are now completely silent apart from the sound of the rain.

“... Is it alive?”

Kurono, who is standing in front of Nell like her protective knight, asks this question.

Before him is the crimson dragon that fell out of the rainy sky, the Salamander. Kurono can see the tip of its nose moving as it breathes.

In the next moment, it opens its red eyes that are as sharp as should be expected of a carnivorous dragon, and its gaze meets Kurono's own.

The Salamander breaks the brief silence with a small growl.

Magnificently spreading its proud wings, the Salamander takes off into the sky once more.

As it takes flight, the wings strong enough to raise the enormous body that is over a dozen meters long create a strong wind that blows forcefully into Kurono's body, causing his black coat and hair to flutter.

He shuts his eyelids and waits for the rain-filled gust to pass, and the next time he opens his odd-colored black and red eyes, the Salamander has already vanished into the distant skies.

As if following the example of the dragon that has left to return to its nest, the other monsters that have awakened begin to scatter in various directions. Leaving behind the countless corpses dotted around Iskia Fortress, they walk away, heading to beyond the green hills in the distance.

And thus, Kurono, Nell and the students who have weathered the battle watch the

magnificent sight of the monsters' journey through the hills, like the mass migration of animals across a savannah field.

"Thanks. With this, everyone is saved."

Kurono turns and speaks words of gratitude towards his beautiful companion.

Nell accepts his thanks, responding with a spellbound expression.

"Yes, I did my best –"

As a result of expending the tremendous amount of magical power required for the incredible ancient spell she has cast, Nell collapses forward.

With her pure-white wings and robe fluttering, her falling body is caught by the pitch-black, bloodstained arms of the Berserker.

"Take your time to rest, Nell."

"Yes, Kurono-kun."

With her face buried in the sturdy chest covered by the demon-skin coat, Nell's expression cannot be seen, but the ears surrounded by her beautiful black hair are faintly red.

And as the black and white figures embrace each other, the students let out a cheer loud enough to blow the fortress walls away.

Rather than feeling joy at having narrowly escaped death, their voices of admiration are directed towards the hero that has brought them victory in the greatest battle of the century.

CHAPTER 334

THE SLOTH AWAKENS

“Come forth and roar, red lightning [Reinhardt!] ”

Charlotte chants the name of her great ancestor who has risen to the position of divinity. His divine protection manifests itself as red lightning, granting power to his beautiful descendent.

The crimson aura that appears instantaneously around her body blows away dozens of the snake-like parasites that have closed in on her.

With her twin tails and cape fluttering proudly behind her, she appears not as the princess of a nation, but as a powerful Rank 5 Thunder Mage.

On the other hand, the Greed-Gore doesn't even look at her as it remains lying at the side of the pond, as if it is confident in its own ability as a Rank 5 monster.

“Hmph, I don't know whether you're an earth-element or lightning-element enemy, but my attacks are strong enough for me to ignore things like resistances!”

Letting out these spirited words, Charlotte waves the [Crimson Bolt] with all her strength and begins to chant.

“تد شغل ال سماء في البرق، تدرى” (The lightning that runs in the sky, look at it.)”

Red lightning is converging at the tip of her wand.

“الأرض إلى الرعد وهدير، يرتجف” (The thunder that echoes in the earth, tremble at it.)”

The thunder that is bundled together there lets out high-pitched explosions that sound like a scream.

“الأحمر مجدياً ساطع” (Shine, my glorious red fury.)”

An object forms before Charlotte, an enormous sword that is twice as long as her own body height. It is in the shape of a traditional Spadan double-edged blade.

“– [Lightning Spada!] ”

<TLN: Just in case you're as confused about this naming as I was, Google tells me that "spada" is a type of sword.>

Charlotte's deadly blade of red lightning, the Ancient Magic that can only be invoked through the divine protection of the Red Lightning Lord Reinhardt, is released.

Her target's body is over thirty meters long; there is no way that she can miss. Even if the Greed-Gore were to take evasive actions, it would be impossible to avoid this lightning-speed electrical attack.

The Greed-Gore does not show any sign of movement, and Charlotte's [Lightning Spada] hits it directly.

The unique crimson lightning shines brightly, enveloping not only the Greed-Gore's body, but the nearby pond as well.

Even the caster, Charlotte herself, closes her eyelids reflexively.

As the thunder that matches the heavy rain that is pouring down echoes across the Iskia Hills, she opens her eyes again. She knows that the light has already subsided.

She also knows that even a Rank 5 monster receiving a direct hit from this attack is surely fatally wounded.

“Ahaha, I did it! Jeez, I knew I should have just done this from the start –”

However, her expectations and confidence are betrayed.

“Eh, no way, what is this!”

Before Charlotte's eyes is the Greed-Gore, lying there exactly as it was before.

The one difference is that its body surface has now turned a brick-red color.

“H-how? Does this mean that it blocked it?!”

Monsters shouldn't be able to understand words, but as if responding to her question, the Greed-Gore moves. No, it uses the Characteristic Ability hidden within its body.

As it releases purple lightning, a deep black sandstorm begins to rise around its body, whose original color seems to have been the red that it is displaying now.

It looks like a darkness-element ability that manipulates the caster's own shadow, but it is indeed black sand that is rising from the ground.

"It's using lightning to control iron sand..."

Though Charlotte cannot be called wise, she herself is a lightning-element user, and so she immediately understands the Greed-Gore's ability.

It is not a black Greed-Gore with a color variation. It has been covering its entire body with iron sand.

This enormous amount of iron sand, compressed and molded around its body to form a black full-body armor, has perfectly blocked the [Lightning Spada.]

The Lightning Spada did indeed have incredible power, enough to blow away all of the armor in an instant, but by recasting this spell, the Greed-Gore can easily rebuild it.

By the time Charlotte comes to understand this, the Greed-Gore's black body lies before her once more.

"Doesn't that mean it's strong with both the earth element and the lightning element...?"

Both people and monsters have affinities for certain elements. If an individual's affinity is for only one element, then that affinity will be strong, while if there are multiple elements, then the affinity is divided evenly among them or distributed with a preference towards one or another. This is a fundamental rule.

However, from this one act, the Greed-Gore appears to have powerful affinities for both the lightning and earth elements.

Indeed, it is as if it is made of two different monsters, one with an affinity for the earth element and one with an affinity for the lightning element.

"It looks like some other Rank 5 monster has taken over the Greed-Gore... This is just the worst, isn't it..."

With this being the case, this is as dangerous as facing two Rank 5 monsters simultaneously.

Never mind Charlotte alone, it is questionable as to whether even the entirety of Wing Road could take it on – As anxiety and unease pass through Charlotte's chest, the Greed-Gore stands up, as if it has finally awakened.

As it stands, it looks like a black mountain of stone. It has the same majestic appearance it had when it appeared before the students several days ago.

Back then, it delegated the work to its subordinates and left, but now it is gazing with both eyes directly at Spada's princess.

It seems the attack that Charlotte was so proud of was an alarm clock for the Greed-Gore. It was sufficient to make even this lazy monster feel cautious enough to set its sights on her and take action personally.

As if to devour her, the Greed-Gore's enormous, vicious mouth opens wide.

"Breath?!"

Charlotte immediately senses danger upon seeing this movement.

There are already small sparks of purple lightning surging inside the Greed-Gore's oral cavity.

A Breath of lightning – No, from the fact that the iron sand protecting its body is now peeling off and gathering around its mouth, it is clear that this is no mere Thunder Breath.

Using all of the iron sand armor on the upper half of its body, it creates a sword.

It has the exact same shape as the [Lightning Spada] that Charlotte threw at it earlier.

The only difference is that it is completely black. It contains the same amount of electrical power – no, perhaps even more. If one were to give it an appropriate name, it would be [Darkness Spada.]

With such an attack about to fly towards her, Charlotte does not feel any desire to turn her back and run.

She has no choice but to make the best defense that she can.

“– [Line Argalea Shield!] ”

To block a lightning-element attack, the best option is to use the absorption effect of the same element. Charlotte casts a high-level lightning-element defensive spell.

A rectangular shield forms in front of her, with the red electricity of her divine protection wrapping around it like thorns.

As the spell is in her element of specialty, it is built to a considerable degree of perfection, even with a short chant. However, she cannot erase her anxiety over whether its defensive power will be sufficient.

“Block it, Raa-chan!”

As commanded, the Undead Wrath-Pun leaps in front of Charlotte and takes a defensive stance to act as her shield.

The Greed-Gore releases its iron-sand blade shining with purple lightning.

All Charlotte sees is a momentary flash around its mouth.

“Kyaa –”

Her vision spins rapidly, she doesn’t know where she is looking or even whether her eyes are working properly.

Even her sense of hearing has been affected. As if lightning has struck right next to her, her ears are ringing loudly. She can’t even hear herself scream.

“U-ugh...”

She realizes that she fainted for a moment.

She can feel the sensations of wet grass and cold raindrops dripping down her cheeks. It seems she is lying face-down.

Looking up a little, she can see the Wrath-Pun collapsed on the ground, its abdomen pierced by an enormous black blade.

She begins to remember.

The blade that pierced the Wrath-Pun continued through, pulverizing the [Line Argalea Shield] that she created.

From the impact of the shield breaking, she was blown several meters away, and now she is in this unsightly state.

“Kuh... I can’t move... my arms...”

Paralysis is the typical additional effect of lightning-element attacks.

The iron-sand blade itself didn’t reach her body, but her body fully received the electrical waves that it released.

The fact that it has applied paralysis to Charlotte, who possesses a high resistance to the lightning element, shows just how incredibly powerful the lightning attack was. The next attack will turn her body to ash if it hits her directly.

However, that is only if that is the death that the Greed-Gore desires for her.

The next attack doesn’t come. Instead, the Greed-Gore slowly approaches Charlotte directly, its footsteps causing the earth to tremble.

“Eh, no way, stop, don’t come here –”

Charlotte, lying face down and unable to move, can only watch as the black menace draws closer to her.

Both arms are paralyzed right down to her fingertips; she can’t even take a Potion from her pouch.

If Nell was here, she would be able to cure her with a single low-level, chant-less restoration spell. No, if she had one more companion, anyone at all, they would be able to use one of her countless expensive items to help her.

As the Greed-Gore stands in front of her, Charlotte learns the hard way just how risky it is to act solo.

It pushes its enormous snout close to her, blowing its breath that reeks of blood upon

Charlotte's beautiful face.

She grimaces at the stench, but she is in a situation where that smell is the least of her problems.

"No! Stop! I'm telling you to stop!"

The Greed-Gore opens its mouth, but it does not devour her. Instead, purple lightning appears once more.

It is unmistakably one of the snakes, a part of the parasite.

From this close, she can see that its body really is made entirely of purple sparks. Like a hydra, its head has no eyes, only an ominous-looking mouth.

More snakes are crawling out through the gaps in between the Greed-Gore's sword-like fangs.

Is one snake insufficient to infest her? Or is it intending to play around with her using multiple snakes?

She trembles in fear.

The only thing Charlotte can do now is let out a scream.

"NOOOO! SAVE ME, NEROOOOOOO!"

"– Instant Flash."

And sure enough, she is saved.

A line of shining white light directly hits the Greed-Gore's snout.

Letting out a surprised cry, the black monster retreats two or three steps.

At the same time, the snakes that were looking to violate Charlotte's body vanish like mist due to the shockwave of the attack.

The parasites have been erased without leaving a single trace, but as if the power of the attack was perfectly calculated, it does not even ruffle Charlotte's hair.

“Nero, you baka... You came... so late...”

She knows exactly who has come to rescue her after seeing the slash of white light.

The martial art that releases long-ranged light-magic attacks, officially known as [Instant Flash.]

This is the signature move of Nero Julius Elroad, the First Prince of Avalon. It is impossible that Charlotte, his childhood friend and party member, does not know this.

“Jeez, you pushed yourself too hard on your own.”

As Charlotte hears a familiar listless voice, a pure-white Unicorn lands lightly in front of her.

“I have a lot of things I want to say to you, but that’ll have to come later. I’ve come to help you, Sharl.”

Thus, the prince on a white horse appears in the princess’s time of need.



The Greed-Gore looks towards the three new prey that have appeared – no, six including their mounts – as if examining them.

With a displeased expression, Nero glares directly back at the sinister, glowing eyes that are as purple as the lightning their owner emits.

“It’s unharmed after receiving a blow from Instant Flash, how tough.”

“It’s strong with both the earth and lightning elements. It even blocked my [Lightning Spada.] ”

Healed by a Status-Effect-removing Potion, Charlotte stands up and explains this information.

“Tch, it really hurts to not have Nell here right now.”

If the Greed-Gore is being controlled by a Rank 5 parasite-type monster, a healing spell to remove Status Effects would be incredibly effective.

Even if it did not defeat the Parasite, it would force it out of the Greed-Gore's body.

"Oi, we have no time to think, let's hurry up and do this!"

Having dismounted from his Bicorn, Kai is already holding his sword in a stance, ready to attack.

"Since we came all the way out here without a plan, we have no choice but to attack it head-on, right?"

Safiel does not get down from atop her false Sleipnir. A spell book is open in her hand, ready to summon a new servant.

Looking at [Raa-chan] who is lying on the ground, she frowns a little in disappointment at the fact that her newest creation has already become a piece of junk.

"Well, I really wanna cut this bastard down as well, so that's fine –"

Readjusting his grip on his sword, Nero gives a fearless smile. However, there is clearly anger shining in his crimson eyes.

"We're going all-out from the very beginning. Formation [Dragon Killer.] "

The one who gives appropriate directions depending on whether they are fighting a person, an army or a monster, is none other than Nero.

The [Dragon Killer] formation that he has ordered, as its name suggests, is a formation created with the objective of killing dragons in mind, a perfect formation for dealing with large monsters. It is a deadly combination where each member uses their divine protection and skills to their full potential.

And so Nero, burning with rage that the Greed-Gore hurt his childhood friend, Kai and Safiel who respond to Nero's expectations, and Charlotte who has made a full recovery thanks to a Potion and the power of love, begin to move to defeat their hated enemy, the Greed-Gore – but at that moment –

GOGYAAAAAAAAAH!

With a reproduction of the terrifying roar that the Greed-Gore let out eight days ago when it first appeared, there is an explosion.

A tower of earth and sand suddenly rises up and mixes with the heavy rain before scattering down over the surroundings.

The fiercely rising cloud of dirt and muddy rain stops Wing Road's first attack.

"Kuh, this bastard – he's gone underground."

As Nero spits out these words, the Greed-Gore's enormous black body has already vanished.

In the place that it was standing just a moment ago is an enormous hole, as if a giant gouged out part of the ground.

It is not that the Greed-Gore moves underground by digging a tunnel large enough for its body to pass through. It simply swims through the earth as easily as if it were water.

Unless one possesses an attack powerful enough to penetrate the earth, they cannot touch the Greed-Gore until it resurfaces.

"Heh, doesn't that just mean we need to cut it down wherever it pops back out?"

"Isn't that impossible? After all, it's getting further and further away."

With her somewhat cold tone, Safiel sounds as if she is joking, but the earthquake-like movements are definitely becoming more distant.

"Eh, could it be that it ran away?"

But as Charlotte speaks these words, sounding somewhat disappointed, Nero denies them.

"No, this direction... It's going towards Iskia Fortress."

"No way! Why?!"

The members of Wing Road are not foolish enough to think that the Greed-Gore has escaped in fear of their power.

Considering the situation carefully, they can assume that something has happened at Iskia Fortress, something important enough for the Greed-Gore, the supreme commander of the army, to go there personally.

Or it is possible that the fortress has been conquered already, and it is headed there to consume its prey in high spirits.

“Shit, either way, this is the worst possible scenario.”

If the Greed-Gore appears at the fortress, then for what purpose have they come all the way out here in the first place?

“Well then, we have to get back quickly!”

“Ah, I think that’s impossible as well.”

Charlotte’s words are shot down once more, this time by Safiel, whose voice has become even more lifeless than before.

Charlotte tries to question her further, but Safiel simply silently points a finger in response.

That is enough for her to understand the situation.

“Oi, don’t tell me we have to fight this guy again...?”

With purple lightning crackling around its entire body, the Wrath-Pun that was protecting Charlotte before rises up from the ground.

The blade of iron sand that pierced its abdomen disintegrates, and then forms an armor to protect its body.

It seems that the partial body of the parasite that has taken over the Wrath-Pun’s body has control over its magical power precise enough to manipulate the iron sand as it wishes.

“I thought it couldn’t control corpses?”

“If it were a normal corpse, that would be the case. It’s hijacked the entire formula of my [Necromancy.] It’s a more powerful parasite than I’d thought. Or maybe the one that’s taken over Raa-chan is special in some way.”

“Oi, either way, we have to defeat it or we can’t return to the fortress, right?!”

The Wrath-Pun that has been revived for the second time lets out a roar, as if in resentment towards its former master.

It is far more powerful and dreadful than the roar that was heard in the Galahad mountain range.

The howl of black wrath echoes out across the Iskia Hills.

CHAPTER 335

FIRST KISS

Note from the author:

Tentacle and B.L. warning. Those who are not comfortable with this may read only the last 15 lines or simply skip to the next chapter, and the story will continue smoothly.

Note from translator:

This chapter was really, really unpleasant for me to translate. Enjoy the chapter, if you're into tentacles (you sick fucks). To the sponsors, if you're not into BL and tentacles, I sincerely apologize.

The inside of the narrow, solid tower is filled with a sickeningly sweet smell.

“Ah... Ugh, ah...”

Rough breathing and high-pitched moans that sounds like a girl in agony can be heard. And as if to drown those out, the wet noises of squirming tentacles echo around.

Simon is completely trapped by the Morjura right now.

His trusty weapon, the rifle with a dagger attached as a bayonet, has long since fallen from his hands and sunk into the oily mucus pouring out of the tentacles; it is as if the Morjura even wants to defile his very will to resist.

“N-no...”

Dozens of tentacles are wrapping themselves around Simon's small body, as if teasing him. Morjuras normally act in groups, but this one is alone. It can slowly take its time to plant only its own seed.

Morjura tentacles are not particularly tough, nor do they have sharp claws or hard thorns. It has no instinct to tear through the shells and skins of the creatures it

captures; it simply creeps around the body and searches for holes.

Simon is wearing his black academy uniform and the blue coat that he was wearing at the battle of Alzas. His clothes are not damaged, and not even a single button is undone.

Tentacles enter his clothes through the sleeves of both his arms and the trouser cuffs of both of his legs. Like a caterpillar crawling its way across a tree's branches, it slowly crawls up his arms and legs. The Morjura seems to be enjoying the white, soft skin that could not possibly be thought to belong to a male.

He feels a squirming, writhing sensation beneath his clothes. At first glance, the tentacles look like flexible vines, but they feel similar to a person's tongue; it possesses the elasticity of flesh. The tentacles are slick with the aphrodisiac-laden mucus that they are constantly secreting. As they crawl around his body, rather than feeling like they are simply twisting around him, it is as if he is being licked by an enormous tongue.

Unable to bear this disgusting sensation, Simon lets out a scream that somehow sounds sweet and enchanting.

His skin is painted with the natural aphrodisiac and its heartburn-inducing stench fills his lungs, causing its effects to reach every inch of his body. Though his partner is a mass of repulsive tentacles, his brain is forced to generate pleasure signals. No matter how much he hates it, no matter how much he cries or screams, he cannot escape from the pleasure. Simon lets out yet another moan.

"Haah, haah... Fuwah..."

The tentacles even wrap around his thin neck. They do not strengthen their grip. The Morjura's goal is not to kill, but to reproduce; it would be pointless if its partner were to perish. The tentacles gently stroke Simon's nape.

At the same time, they slip into his clothes even from his neck. From the collar of his shirt to the spaces in between the buttons, anywhere there is an opening, it mercilessly thrusts itself inside.

The tentacles caress his thin chest, crawl across his spine, lick at his belly button, and travel down even further below that –

“No, ah...!”

And so, the tentacles that are now completely dominating Simon’s body all simultaneously begin their attempt to enter the hole that they have finally found. The foreplay has come to an end.

“AAAAAAAAAH!”

An echoing scream. Feelings of disgust and rejection can still be heard in it. It is his last act of resistance.

However, though the Morjura is the most horrible, most disgusting rapist, it possesses the ability to drive a person mad with pleasure. When captured by a Morjura, such resistance is very short-lived.

Once actual penetration begins, it won’t even take five minutes to conquer Simon, who is merely an Elf with no exceptional mental fortitude or poison resistance.

As if to disallow him from even screaming, the tentacle wrapped around Simon’s neck attempts to enter his mouth. Thick, gooey fluids are leaking from the tip of the tentacle that is as thick as a child’s arm, as if it is eager to release its seed right this moment.

As the filthy tip of the tentacle rubs against Simon’s soft, cherry-blossom-colored lips and finally begins its movement to violate the inside of his mouth –

“Simon!”

He hears a man’s voice call his name from beyond the unopened metal door.

“No way... Onii-san...”

He can only assume that it is an auditory hallucination. His reasoning and self-awareness have long since melted away in the pleasure. Is his brain simply trying to show him some pleasant illusion?

However, as if to deny this possibility, he definitely hears his name being called once more, as well as the sound of the metal door being violently slammed against.

And in the next instant, with a deafening metallic sound, the door is thrown open – no, it is broken down.

It is a solid door made of steel, but with astounding force, it is completely crushed. The door that has now become scrap metal flies forcefully into the tower, hitting the wall with a loud crash before coming to a halt on the floor.

“Simon...”

Standing in the now-unobstructed doorway is a large man. He has black hair and black and crimson odd-colored eyes. There is no way that Simon can mistake this person’s identity.

He really came to save Simon – however, that happiness lasts only an instant before being swallowed by a feeling of defeat.

Kurono is the first person who understood him, his best friend. And that is precisely why Simon doesn’t want this horrible rape to be seen –

“Don’t... look at me...”



“Simon...”

A sickly-sweet scent that irritates my nose. A mass of tentacles writhing in the dim tower. And a person entangled and trapped inside it.

“Don’t... look at me...”

A voice that sounds as if its owner’s heart will break at any moment reaches my ears, such an incredibly fragile voice.

Before I can comprehend what Simon is feeling to let out such words, my rage exceeds all limits.

Oi, you piece of shit, just what the fuck do you think you’re doing to my Simon?

“UOAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

I even forget to arm myself with my weapons, and simply punch the monster violating my best friend with all my fury.

Of course, black magical power flows out and swirls around my fist. I don't need a precise image or complicated spell formula. The shortest, fastest spell I can cast, I don't even need to chant its name - the [Pile Bunker] flies straight into the Morjura.

It breaks through the layer of tentacles that have hardened up in a ball-like shape, and the magical power around my fist disintegrates the central organ within, which is beating like a heart.

As the tentacles reaching out towards Simon are torn off, the pulverized main body flies away and hits the stone wall. With a splattering sound, its flesh scatters messily like a squashed tomato.

It's gone and died in one hit, damn it. My anger hasn't subsided in the slightest, but I don't have time to worry about that right now.

"Oi, Simon! Are you alright?!"

Released from the tentacles' grip, Simon collapses like a puppet whose strings have been cut.

"Get a hold of yourself!"

The tentacles are wrapped around his body like countless snakes, and the sight is enough to make me feel physically ill.

Shit, how dare it wrap these filthy things around him...

The first thing I do is lay Simon on his back and pull out the tentacles in his sleeves, trouser cuffs and collars. Even though the main body is destroyed, the tentacles are still squirming around like severed octopus legs. If I don't remove them quickly, he can't be treated.

"Ah... Ngh!"

Every time I remove a tentacle, Simon's body trembles and he lets out a moan.

His breathing is rough and his face is flushed, and his empty yet feverish, moist jade-colored eyes are looking directly at me. For a moment, I actually begin to forget that Simon is a male. That's how charming his gaze is.

Damn it, calm down. This isn't it, I need to be more calm and think about the current situation!

It's alright, Simon's definitely alive. I don't see any external wounds. His life shouldn't be in any danger.

"Simon, can you hear my voice? Are you still conscious?"

"U, uu... Onii-san... Onii-sa~an."

He recognizes me. He doesn't seem to be completely crazy, but the Morjura's aphrodisiac appears to have circulated through his body quite a lot. I suppose that's to be expected, since his whole body is wet with this mucus.

The problem isn't just the effects of the aphrodisiac; it's possible that the Morjura has released its seed into his body. If he's not treated quickly, it might be too late.

Fortunately, there were several Priests among the students, and once Nell gets some rest, she'll be able to heal him as well.

And best of all, I have a bottle of antidote for the Morjura's aphrodisiac.

I prepared it just in case upon accepting that quest to become Rank 3, but I never imagined that I'd be using it at a time like this.

"This is an antidote potion, drink it."

As I take the potion out from my shadow, I raise Simon's body, which is now clear of tentacles.

I take out the cork and bring the bottle close to his mouth, which is partially open and covered in saliva and mucus.

"Ngh, guh – *cough!*"

However, unable to swallow it properly, he chokes and spits it out. As the spray hits my face and arms, I get a bad feeling.

There's only a mouthful of the antidote potion. If you look at it one way, it means that only a small amount is needed to have a sufficient effect, but because Simon couldn't

swallow properly, almost half of it has gone to waste.

Is it alright to just try to make him drink it again? No, if he can't swallow properly, isn't it dangerous to try to force him to drink it? But even so, the faster he drinks the antidote, the less likely it is that there will be after-effects –

“What am I hesitating for, I have to do it, right? Simon, I'm going to feed you the potion one more time, so drink it properly!”

I harden my resolve as I shout, and then empty the potion into my own mouth. I don't swallow it, I simply hold it there.

In other words, I'm going to feed it to him mouth-to-mouth.

With no hesitation, I press my lips against Simon's half-open mouth.

The sensation of my first kiss - or at least, it still feels like a kiss, even though it isn't really a kiss - is enough to make me feel like I'm going to lose consciousness.

What is this, it's really soft, are lips supposed to be this soft? I can smell not only the sickly-sweet scent of the mucus, but a feminine scent similar to Lily and Fiona's.

Ah, damn it, get a hold of yourself!

I reprimand myself as I desperately concentrate to let the potion flow into Simon's mouth.

There's no point in giving it to him all at once. I have to give it to him slowly, little by little, so that he doesn't spit it out again.

“Ngh – NGH?!”

In the middle of this, I feel [something] with the tip of my tongue and almost separate my mouth from his. However, I suddenly realize that Simon is holding my head tightly with both his arms and I can't separate our mouths even if I wanted to.

It's just like a passionate kiss between lovers... No, in this situation, you can actually call this a French kiss. I actually realized right away that the thing entwining around my tongue is Simon's own small tongue.

I wonder what Simon is thinking or what kind of hallucination he is seeing right now.

If you're having a wonderful dream where you're kissing some unrivaled beauty, then please keep having that dream. It would be too cruel for you to know the truth. Including the fact that my heart can't help but to beat fast in excitement.

Before long, all of the potion that was in my mouth reaches Simon's wriggling tongue and is swallowed successfully.

Letting out a long breath, as if taking a rest, our mouths separate. A string of our saliva with the Morjura's mucus mixed in falls between us.

After a moment, I realize that my own breathing has grown wild.

"Haah... Haah... Onii... sa..."

Simon's eyelids close as he whispers to me. I don't know whether his stamina has given out or whether it's an effect of the antidote, but it seems he's asleep now.

His breathing is normal and he's just letting out cute sleeping noises. I don't see anything out of the ordinary, at least.

"... He's saved."

As I watch Simon's calm face while he sleeps, I finally get that feeling.

That's right, I managed to save my friends this time.

I'm glad, I'm so glad. I'm glad you're alive. I rushed here as quickly as I could, I dragged Nell into this mess, I exploited Merry, but even so, I'm glad I made it in time...

As I'm basking in my feelings of relief –

GOAAAAAH!

An incredibly loud roar echoes out, shaking the tower.

“What?!”

I intuitively guess that a monster has appeared nearby. As I stand up to look outside through the nearby window, I realize just what kind of monster it is.

I’ve never seen this monster before. But right now, the crimson left eye that I received from Mia flashes a bright red. This is unmistakably the light that signals my trial.

“So you’ve come, Greed-Gore.”

CHAPTER 336

THE SECOND TRIAL

“Kuronno-ku~un!”

As I rush over to the fortress gate as fast as I can with Simon on my back, Nell comes out to greet me. She’s waving her hand like mad, trying to catch my attention over the great number of students. She collapsed from using up all her magical power not long ago; is she alright to be doing that?

“Kuronno! Is Simon safe?”

Will, who is standing next to Nell, sees Simon on my back and shouts his question towards me.

I can’t laugh at him for making a big fuss about it. Right after Nell took care of the monster army, Will came to me and asked me to rescue Simon.

[Radiance Exile] is a healing spell. The only things that it eliminated on contact with its purifying light were the parasites; the monsters themselves were unaffected. Therefore, he had doubts about the safety of Simon, who was trapped inside that tiny tower.

Infested by a parasite or not, there’s no reason a monster wouldn’t attack prey right before its eyes.

If I’d arrived earlier, I wouldn’t have any regrets. But even so –

“Yeah, he’s just asleep, his life isn’t in any danger.”

“Oh... UOOOOH! SIMON!”

“Don’t wake him up, he definitely needs some rest.”

Letting out a waterfall of tears, Will practically leaps onto Simon and buries his face into his back. I get that you’re happy, but at least let me put him down gently first.

“Nell, judging from your appearance, it seems your magical power has recovered.”

“Yes, I drank a Hi-Potion to restore my magical power, so I am fine now.”

Not just a potion, but a Hi-Potion. As expected, Rank 5 adventurers carry some good things with them.

“I’m sorry to ask you so soon after what you’ve already done, but can you please heal my friend Simon?”

Giving Will a quick glance, I whisper in Nell’s ear so that only she can hear me.

“He was attacked by a Morjura. I got him to drink an antidote, but just in case, is it possible for you to help him recover properly?”

I’m sure Nell immediately realizes what it means when I say that he was attacked by a Morjura. She gives a gasp in response, but quickly hardens her expression and gives me a reply.

“Yes, please leave it to me.”

“Oh, if Princess Nell takes a look at him, I can rest assured! FAAHAHAHA!”

Will lets out a loud laugh, drowning out my “thanks” to Nell. I never thought that I would find this laughter to be calming... No, this isn’t the time to space out.

“Are you serious?! Isn’t that the Greed-Gore?!”

“Damn it, what the hell are Wing Road doing?!”

“I-it’s over, there’s no way we can beat something like that...”

The tops of the fortress’s walls are noisy with the students’ shouts and screams.

That’s right, the danger hasn’t passed yet. No, this is where the truly desperate situation begins.

I turn to look back to see a large black body beyond the open fortress gate.

The Rank 5 monster that I’ve been searching for, the Greed-Gore, has finally appeared

before me.

“Will, it’ll be great if you guys can back me up. But it’s best if the students don’t go out to the front.”

The Greed-Gore lets out a growl as it takes a step that shakes the whole ground, approaching this place.

It’s freaking massive. It’s the biggest monster I’ve ever faced. It’s like a moving mountain of stone.

“Right now, I am the great general who leads this group of elite young people who bear the future of Spada’s military. Leave the command of your backup to me! And... Fu, for you who bears the title of Nightmare Berserker, the students would no doubt be nothing but a burden to you, no matter how splendid they are. Indeed, none should approach the combat of the mad warrior!”

No, there’s no danger of me mistaking my allies for enemies and cutting them down, I was just saying that because it’s dangerous for them to face the Greed-Gore directly... Well, whatever.

“Kurono-kun! Umm, please don’t push yourself too hard, okay?”

I can’t turn back to Nell, who is behind me, to give her a reply. The reason is, that’s something I can’t promise.

“... Nell, give me a Boost.”

With just those words, I rush out through the fortress gate. Leaving behind Nell’s elegant chanting, Will’s loud laughter and the cheers of the students who seem to be placing their expectations on me, I head straight forwards to challenge the Greed-Gore – the second trial.



The Greed-Gore is furious. Its precious army has been eradicated. Now it cannot spend its time in idleness.

It knows who has caused this. Right before the parasites were eliminated by that white light, it clearly saw that person in the visual information that was relayed via the

monsters' eyes.

It was a female with wings that was not a human, nor a bird, nor a Harpy. That female is dangerous. No matter how tedious it is, she must be eliminated immediately. The Greed-Gore has decided to leave the re-infestation of the monsters until later; even if it has to fight alone, time is of the essence.

Even going so far as to use underground movement that is its fastest method of travel, the Greed-Gore has brought itself all the way out here to the [nest of humans.]

In front of it, it can see the female from the visual information that it received. There is not a single obstacle between her and the Greed-Gore. Therefore, it simply takes a step forward.

“Bullet Arts – Full Burst!”

Something a little harder than the falling raindrops hits the Greed-Gore's body. On top of its already thick, rock-like carapace, there is a layer of armor made of densely-packed iron sand. Its ability to sense impacts on its body is dulled to the point that it would barely notice even if a Dortoth rammed into it with full power.

“Ah, shit, it's too hard!”

There's something small and black wandering around its feet. It seems that this is the source of the intermittent sandstorm-like phenomenon, but even after the Greed-Gore realizes this, it forgets about it a moment later. Its target is not black, but white –

“How about over here!”

At that moment, one of those rock-hard projectiles flies directly towards its eye.

Though the majority of its defense is as tough as an iron wall, its eyes are still unprotected. Sand or rocks hitting it will hurt. It must block it.

The Greed-Gore comes to a decision - it definitely has the time to do so.

As it perceives the black pebble, time stops – or at least, it appears to. In reality, everything around it simply appears to be moving very, very slowly.

This is one of its lightning-element Characteristic Abilities, [Mental Concentration.]

Its primary effect is to greatly speed up its thought processes and reaction time. This is also accompanied by a sharp increase in the rate at which its nervous system relays information, and its actual physical ability and speed of movement are also enhanced. However, its body is not strengthened, so if it moves too quickly, it will put a strain on its body. Of course, it instinctively knows the limits of its own body.

And right now, its instincts are telling it, "this is not a problem." Now it must simply deal with the situation.

The black object flying towards the Greed-Gore's eye seems to have been traveling at a considerable speed; even in this world where everything has come to a stop, it is clearly still moving. The raindrops falling through the air are almost completely stationary, so that means that this object is moving far faster than the terminal velocity of raindrops.

It must avoid a direct hit against its eye. This is very simple to achieve. Thanks to the increased speed of the Greed-Gore's thought processes, there is no need for a large reaction such as taking an evasive maneuver.

Indeed, all it needs to do is shut its eyelid.

And then it releases the [Mental Concentration.] Time begins to flow normally once more.

"Is it a coincidence – no, can it see the bullet?!"

The Greed-Gore's eyeball is soft, but its eyelid is still hard. It is not as tough as its back or its tail, but it still has its thick, sand-covered skin, as well as the layer of iron sand for additional defense.

However, it is growing tired of this black thing; it has become quite irritating. It must be crushed.

Instead of taking another step forward, the Greed-Gore simply slams its raised leg into the ground with all its power. With this single stomping attack, the enormous monster causes an earthquake and a landslide simultaneously.

The pure, physical destructive power exerted by the sole of its foot is enough to shake the entirety of the Iskia Hills. And the earth-element Characteristic Ability causes a tsunami of earth and sand that swallows everything around it.

“Guh, Shield!”

The black thing around its legs is too small, so it doesn't bother trying to aim. It was not able to crush it directly, but the violent shockwave of earth has succeeded in sending it flying away.

Now that it has taken care of the nuisance, the Greed-Gore continues onwards.

It closes in on the nest of its prey in front of it. It is a human nest protected by vertical, rectangular masses of stone, but it is fragile enough that the Greed-Gore can knock it down in one attack by throwing its body against it.

As long as that white female does not use those wings on her back to fly away and escape, she will be crushed easily. No, the Greed-Gore should crush her using its jaws, just to be sure.

Its target is now right in front of it.

“Fiiire – !”

At that moment, the rain that fills the air is once again joined by miscellaneous projectiles.

Pointed bits of metal that humans and some monsters like to use, balls of fire, icicles, wind – their attacks are greatly varied. Though the Greed-Gore cannot tell the attacks apart at all, it does know that the elements and magical attacks that humans use can be different from one another.

But it matters not, as none of these attacks can penetrate this overwhelming defense, no matter what element they are. The Greed-Gore pays them no heed whatsoever.

However, it is irritating.

Ah, how bothersome, how troublesome. It wants to send everything flying with a single attack – with its sloth-like instincts telling it that, the Greed-Gore stops its footsteps.

“Nice! Its movements have stopped; keep firing – !”

The male standing next to that female lets out an incredibly loud cry. Judging from the

fact that the attacks continue to fire in response to that voice, it could possibly be the leader of this group of humans, but the Greed-Gore's instincts tell it otherwise. They tell it,"there is no way that such a weak-looking human could be their leader."

After less than a second's hesitation, the Greed-Gore begins concentrating its mind and magical power to sweep away this troublesome group of humans.

First, with a rumbling noise, it inhales deeply. As its lungs expand to their maximum capacity, it finishes taking in the magical power floating around in the air.

At the same time, it uses its ability that is of both the lightning and earth elements to quickly manipulate the iron sand from around its legs, creating stake-like objects which thrust themselves into the ground. The reason for this is that the claws of its feet will be insufficient to keep its body anchored in this position.

With this, preparations for release are in their final stage. Purple lightning is already crackling at the Greed-Gore's mouth.

Now all it needs to do is decide on its target and spit everything out in one attack.

"– It's a Breath! Block it, Nell!"

Yes, she must block the Greed-Gore's greatest, most powerful, most lethal move – the [Plasma Breath.]

Note from the author:

There was such a flood of critical comments on the previous chapter, [First Kiss] , that I added a prefacing warning.

I intended it to have a deeper meaning than simply “I wanted to write a scene like this”, but as there are many who feel that unpleasant things are still unpleasant, I will apologize for my lack of consideration. I am very sorry.

It is common knowledge that authors should not discuss the contents of their work, but I will take the opportunity here to explain myself.

In the previous chapter 334, [The sloth awakens] , Charlotte is rescued mostly unharmed. The purpose of chapter 335 was to make it clear that her solo actions have caused irreparable damage.

The idea was that If Sharl had not acted on her own, Simon would not have had to suffer like this. I felt that “the fortress was in trouble” would be insufficient for this. I also wanted Kurono’s rescue of Simon from that situation to be imperfect.

The tentacle attack scene was long and drawn out, and there were certainly parts that I could have omitted if I wanted to, but I thought that it would not portray the situation as well if I did. Also, I feel that it is in the literary style of [Kuro no Maou] to depict unpleasant scenes without omitting anything.

With that said, there are absolute taboos that even I will not cross in my work, so I will never depict the sexual violation or netorare of a main heroine.

Therefore, I pushed the role of being assaulted by a tentacle monster onto Simon, who is a male, allowing me to avoid the aforementioned taboo and still satisfy myself in depicting sexual assault, the second most terrible thing to happen to someone after death.

Now, I will talk about the BL between Simon and Kurono.

This is the part that I am most remorseful for. The description of Kurono’s mouth-to-

mouth feeding to Simon was crucial, but I do realize that there was no need for Kurono to feel so excited about it.

The reason that the mouth-to-mouth feeding was necessary was, I did not want Kurono to only have pleasant memories about love. When he looks back, he will remember that his first kiss was with Simon (a male). I believe that such a dark thing in his past is necessary for Kurono as a character.

At the same time, his partner for the kiss could not simply be any male. It had to be Simon, for whom Lily first harbored jealousy (in chapter 95, [First feelings of jealousy]).

What is important in this scene was that Kurono thinks that Simon is cute, but he is still a male (and not an object of romantic interest), and that Simon does not swing that way (as he felt clear sexual attraction to the large breasts of Emilia and Sofia), but he still thinks of Kurono as more than just a friend. This creates the delicate nuance in the kiss between the two, who definitely do not have romantic feelings towards each other. But in hindsight, I realize that I should have suppressed the BL components as I wrote the scene.

This is a small spoiler, but Simon will never officially become a heroine (either by gender swap or by Kurono turning bisexual). So for those of you who are apprehensive about more BL developments in the future, you can read on and rest assured that this will not happen.

Incidentally, even if the one who had been attacked was not Simon but Will, Nero, or even some unattractive male student whose name he did not know, Kurono would still have performed the mouth-to-mouth feeding in that situation.

With that, I hope that everyone continues to enjoy [Kuro no Maou.]

CHAPTER 337

PLASMA BREATH

“Buah! Damn it, some of it got in my mouth!”

After being swept away in the earth and soil from the Greed-Gore’s stomping attack, I stand up in a worse state than a kindergartener who’s been playing with mud.

The heavy rain that is still pouring incessantly acts like a natural shower that rinses it off, but the feeling of discomfort lingers. However, I have no time to be concerned about that.

The Greed-Gore that’s stopped several dozen meters in front of the fortress’s walls is taking a deep, relaxed breath, ignoring the arrows and magical attacks that are being fired at Will’s command.

“– It’s a Breath! Block it, Nell!”

For many monsters, a large inhalation indicates an imminent breath attack. This is something that even a Rank 1 adventurer knows. Even if I didn’t shout, I’m sure that Nell and the other students would be aware of what’s coming.

The reason that I couldn’t help but to shout anyway is the tremendous presence of the sheer amount of magical energy surging up from the Greed-Gore.

A chill runs down my spine. Just how powerful is this guy’s Breath going to be? Won’t it be enough to blow away Iskia Fortress in one attack?

Letting it fire is too dangerous. But I don’t have a proper plan!

My original plans for defeating the Greed-Gore were built upon the assumption that I’d have Lily and Fiona with me. Now that I’m in the midst of battle on my own, it would be fair to say that I have no plan at all.

But it’s an adventurer’s job to do something about it anyway. If I can’t, there will have been no meaning in me coming here, and if I can’t overcome the second trial, defeating the Apostles will be impossible.

“UOAAAAAAAAAAH!”

I run forward at full speed, closing the distance that I’ve been blown as quickly as possible.

I reach the Greed-Gore in the blink of an eye, but ominous purple lightning is already gushing out of its mouth.

I only have time to get one attack in before it fires, huh. In that case, this attack is my only choice!

“YAMINAGIIIIIIIIII!”

With both hands, I drive the [Absolute Malice Hatchet”Neck Cutter”] into the Greed-Gore with all the force I can muster.

With my enemy being so enormous that I have to look up to see it, the only place I can try to cut is its legs. It has its feet set deep in the earth - no, the iron sand covering its body has been manipulated and has changed its shape to become black pillars around its legs that anchors its feet into the ground.

I use the most powerful martial arts at my disposal, aiming at the ankle of one of the vertical legs that have sunk deep into the earth.

“- Guh, uoah!”

It’s hard. Harder than anything I’ve ever tried to cut into before. My blade doesn’t cut deep enough to find flesh, and instead of blood, all that comes out is a spray of iron sand.

However, the thing that surprises me more than the Greed-Gore’s sheer hardness is the force with which my blade is repelled.

I didn’t expect that I’d be able to cut through this stone-tower-like leg in one attack, even with the [Yaminagi.] But because of the unexpected, powerful repulsion, I wasn’t even able to cut through the black pillar around it. My blade has stopped about halfway in.

Damn it, what is this strange repulsion? It’s not just hard, it’s like the pillar is reacting with the same force - I see, it’s causing its own iron sand to burst out!

The moment it's attacked from the outside, it causes an outwards explosion from inside to nullify it.

I come to the unpleasant realization that there's still a lot of iron sand flying around, considering that my blade is already embedded in it. It's not because [Yaminagi] is so powerful, but because the Greed-Gore is causing the sand to fly out on its own.

This kind of incredible reaction would probably be impossible through just manipulating the iron sand using an earth-element ability. It's only because the Greed-Gore possesses powerful abilities of both earth and lightning elements that it's possible to produce this reactive armor.

I don't have time to be admiring the small details.

My full-power attack has merely caused some of the iron-sand pillar encasing one of the legs to spray around a bit; none of the damage has gone through to the leg itself. My blade has barely reached the brick-red carapace on the other side of the iron sand.

In other words, I haven't managed to land a blow strong enough to interrupt the Breath.

"Damn it -"

And then a torrent of ominous purple light streams forth from the Greed-Gore's mouth. It's not a simple Thunder Breath. This is far more powerful; maybe it should be called a Plasma Breath.

Looking at this beam that's like one of Lily's that's been magnified a hundredfold, I can feel the tremendous destructive power it contains.

Can this attack even be blocked by mere defensive spells -

"- [Lux Rampart Defan!] "

Nell's defensive spell unfolds, a moment before the Breath is unleashed. Of course, she's not alone. The fatigued Mage-class students, who have been fighting to hold the fortress for several consecutive days, pay no heed to the fact that they could collapse at any moment from spending all their magical power and cast their own defensive spells with everything they have.

The [Shields] and [Defans] of each student's element of specialty expand in front of the fortress's walls, like blossoming flowers of every color.

Shining the brightest among all of them is Nell's high-class, wide-area defensive spell of white light, [Lux Rampart Defan.]

The role of the Priest class is far from being a simple healer. In the first place, in order to heal one's companions, they must already be injured.

The only thing that they are weak at is offense. Their main roles in battle are to support their allies with Boosts and one more task - defense.

Therefore, the defensive magic produced by Nell, a Rank 5 adventurer, is top-notch. It is only natural that her spell is overwhelmingly effective for defense compared to those of the students.

In addition to the [Lux Rampart Defan] , due to the support of the [Element Boost] from the students, another defensive spell of the light element, [Force Shield] , is layered on top of it.

The enormous, rectangular wall of light that covers all of the students atop the fortress's walls completely can only be described as incredible. At the very least, it's the most amazing defense that I've ever laid my eyes on.

However, I still have my doubts as to whether it will be enough to block this Plasma Breath.

“HAVE ONE MOOOOORE!”

As the Greed-Gore's attack explodes against the multitude of defensive spells, I unleash my [Yaminagi] once more.

Aware that the bright light and sounds of destruction are produced by the the defensive shields and walls being erased in the blink of eye, I slash into the same spot on the ankle that I was aiming at earlier with all my strength.

It's hard. And once more, my attack is met with a reaction from the iron sand. Only a black spray emerges from the opening that I've made.

But this is enough. The blade has stopped in the Greed-Gore's red-brown carapace; it's

not managing to reach its flesh, but I've managed to cut through the pillar that anchors it to the ground.

This pillar likely serves to counteract the Breath's recoil. Cutting through it should disrupt the Greed-Gore's aim.

Also, its Characteristic Ability is concentrated on managing the Breath, so it can't replace the iron sand immediately. It can't rebuild the pillar if I break it during the Breath.

It seems my suspicions were correct; the leg in front of me that's like a massive tree begins to sway. Its claws that are as big as my arms are buried in the ground. However, slowly but surely, they are sliding through the earth.

As the Greed-Gore lets out a frustrated roar, the Breath is finally diverted away.

If it had been firing for three more seconds, the last of the defensive spells would probably have been broken through. The only one left now is Nell's [Lux Rampart Defan.] It flickers several times before fading away.

The Greed-Gore's mouth, the barrel through which the Breath is being fired, is now flailing around like a hose with the tap turned on too strongly. Completely unable to control the recoil, its rectangular head tilts around.

The Breath mows down everything in its path. A line of destruction is drawn on the walls of Iskia Fortress.

They are the sturdy walls that survived the territorial wars with the neighboring country of Fauren in the distant past, but they fall apart as the torrent of purple lightning hits them.

With a sound like roaring thunder, the walls of solid stone are blown into tiny pieces, drowning out the screams of the students.

It only took an instant for the breath to mow them down. Towards the end, the Breath shoots upwards, disappearing into the rainclouds like lightning traveling in the wrong direction.

After a moment of silence, the damaged walls begin to crumble loudly. The walls near the students are intact, and everyone is unharmed. In the end, there are no casualties,

but... Most of the Mage class students are probably out of magical power.

If the Greed-Gore fires that Breath again, everyone will be finished for sure. I'll defeat the Greed-Gore before that happens - no, I have to at least pull off an attack that can draw its attention to only me -

I scrape together all of my knowledge on how to fight monsters to try to come up with a plan, but as if refusing to give me even the smallest window of time to act, the pillar of iron sand around the Greed-Gore's leg digs into the earth's surface once more.

It seems that it is using the iron sand that normally covers its tail to create the pillar; the tail's black surface is peeling off and the original red color is being exposed all the way to its tip.

The leg-pillar that I blew away has re-formed, even thicker than the previous one. This time, it won't be destroyed by two uses of [Yaminagi.]

No, wait. That's not what I should be worried about right now. The fact that the Greed-Gore is taking up this posture once more means that -

"It can... use the Breath consecutively..."

It's a well-known fact that Mages can't cast powerful spells consecutively. Fiona runs out of magical power with a single cast of [Aur Soleil] , and after Nell casts [Providence Dispel] , she becomes so fatigued that she develops a fever.

However, it seems that this rule doesn't apply to monsters. Well, I don't remember the Greed-Gore giving me a polite explanation like "This Breath is my most powerful move so I can only use it once, man."

I'd just foolishly assumed that it can't use the Breath consecutively.

This is bad, real bad. A sense of pure desperation rises up within me. With the absurd consecutive Breaths unfolding before my eyes, I can't think straight.

As I stand here in panic, the Greed-Gore slowly prepares to fire for the second time.

This time, its legs are planted firmly in the ground so that they won't sway. It inhales deeply, as if sucking in all the magical power from the surrounding air. It takes up its stance with its head and long tail in a straight, horizontal line.

With this enormous, fixed cannon in front of me, there is no technique I can use to do anything against it.

I glance quickly at the fortress and see Nell raising the [Scale of White Wings] to cast defensive magic once more. On her own, even if she casts [Lux Rampart Defan] again, the defense won't last three seconds against a direct hit from the Breath.

I-I have to do something, or everyone will die.

What should I do, am I supposed to do? What can I do to block the Breath? I have less than thirty seconds left. What can I possibly do in this tiny window of time -

"Goshujin-sama."

Suddenly, I hear a voice.

I only know one person who would call me "Goshujin-sama." It's the talkative maid inhabiting a piece of cursed equipment whose voice I have now become very accustomed to hearing.

"Goshujin-sama, I'll do my best."

So are you telling me to use you? But to take on the huge Greed-Gore with only the slightly enhanced [Anchor Hands...]

"I'LL DO MY BEST!"

Whatever, I have no time to worry about that. Hitsugi, I'm betting everything on you!

CHAPTER 338

HITSUGI DOES HER BEST

“Anchor Hands!”

I store my hatchet away and use my now-free hands to concentrate on using the [Anchor Hands.]

Now that I think about it, I’ve never poured so much of my power into just making tentacles. Even I’m surprised by the sheer number of tentacles extending forth from my arms.

I aim at the cannon that is the Greed-Gore’s head. The countless tentacles entwine themselves around the object that looks like it’s made out of solid rock.

They wrap around the Greed-Gore’s head and neck firmly, like the reins of a horse. My plan is to pull on these with all of my strength to throw off its aim.

No matter what attack I use, I can’t prevent it from firing, and no matter what defensive magic is used, it can’t block that Breath. With that being the case, the only option left is to make the attack miss.

“Give me power – [Force Boost.] ”

Right now, I have the Boost that I had Nell cast on me as we charged towards the fortress. Combined with my own [Force Boost] , it’s effectively a double-effect strengthening, but I wonder whether it’s enough to move the Greed-Gore’s enormous body.

Even so, I have no choice but to do this.

“Pull, Hitsugi!”

“FOOOH!”

I wonder if Hitsugi is serious about this; a strangely silly-sounding, yet cute war cry reverberates inside my head. At the same time, an image of a small, elementary-

schooler-sized maid with her teeth clenched appears in my head – Hitsugi’s original appearance.

I find this extremely intriguing, but right now, I have no choice but to focus on combining my strength with hers.

I pull on the tentacle-reins with brute, physical strength while Hitsugi retracts the tentacles, like pulling in a rope using a winch, adding even more force.

My reconstructed body, the double-cast strengthening effects and the assistance from my cursed item – with these, I would be able to pull a semi-trailer without a problem.

However, the Greed-Gore is simply too heavy. It really feels like I’m trying to move a mountain.

Even so, I can’t give up. This is the only thing I’m able to do right now, isn’t it?!

“Guh, ugh, UOOOOOOOOH!”

Finally, I feel some movement.

However, at the same time, an ominous sound reaches my ears.

“Fueh~ Goshujin-sama~”

As Hitsugi lets out a voice that sounds like a complaint, I want to do the same. My worst fear is coming true.

Unable to bear the force with which they are being pulled, the [Anchor Hands] have begun to tear.

They should be as strong as steel cables, but even so, they’re not strong enough to bring down this ridiculously heavy monster.

It’s not Hitsugi’s fault; it’s because I’m inexperienced at using the [Anchor Hands.]

Even so, I don’t have the time to be regretting that fact now.

I have to think of some kind of plan, any kind of plan, otherwise that Breath is going to hit Iskia Fortress, where Nell and everyone else is.

Damn it, what do I have to do to make the [Anchor Hands] stronger? Putting more magical power into them isn't the answer.

I need something even harder than steel – wait, I have it! I have the best material right here!

Yes, the Greed-Gore's iron sand armor that I blew off with my [Yaminagi] is scattered around my feet. This place has turned into a sandbox; there's plenty of material here.

With the second Breath incoming, the Greed-Gore didn't have time to return this iron sand to its body. Since this high-quality iron sand is no longer under the Greed-Gore's control, I'll gratefully accept this gift and make use of it.

“Blackening!”

I tread firmly in the iron sand and use my feet to invoke Blackening. Since the iron sand is black in the first place, it's difficult to see the Enchantment taking place, but I can feel the sensation of my magic taking effect.

All of the iron sand spread around my feet is now under my control.

I use the stolen, Blackened iron sand to cover the surface of the tentacles. Like a swarm of countless ants, the iron sand streams over the tentacles in the blink of an eye.

For now, I've attached the iron sand to the tentacles, but whether this works as an Enchantment depends on Hitsugi.

Please absorb it. No, this isn't a request, but a [command] from your goshujin-sama.

“Do something with this! HITSUGIIIIIIIIII!”

“Yes! GOSHUJIN-SAMAAAAAAA!”

Hitsugi answers my command. I can clearly hear her response. The [Black Hair Curse”Coffin”] begins to absorb the iron sand.

This isn't a temporary strengthening caused by an Enchantment. It's absorbing this new material and integrating the iron sand completely.

The [Anchor Hands] that are already deployed change their composition to include

this iron sand. They become stronger, harder. They are cursed tentacles that will never let go of their target.

The wire-like tentacles made of black hair have transformed – no, evolved into a new shape.

“Well done, Hitsugi, now you are –”

They have become chains. Pitch-black chains, made of steel links strengthened by black magic, with the iron sand as their base.

“– the [Black Chain Curse”Iron Cage!”] ”

Indeed, the tentacles as strong as steel have now become chain reins that are strong enough to move the Greed-Gore’s body. They won’t break like before.

“UOOOOOOOOOOOH!”

“YAAAAAAAAAAH!”

I use the last of my strength and the evolved Hitsugi lends me her assistance as well, pulling in the tentacles with even more force.

Finally, the fixed cannon made of black steel begins to lurch sideways – and immediately afterwards, it fires.

The second shining, purple Plasma Breath only brushes against Iskia Fortress slightly.

As a result of the Greed-Gore’s aim being forcibly altered, this second beam misses by even more than the first one and buries itself into the earth of the Iskia Hills.

The sound and tremors make me think that the hills themselves are collapsing. Along with the thunderous ringing, I can see the Breath causing the dirt to erupt into the air and dance in the sky.

The particles and dust expand, threatening to swallow the whole of Iskia Fortress.

The rising pillar of smoke spreads out to form a thick layer in the sky, even blocking out this heavy rain.

I once again realize just how powerful the Breath is; it's a terrifying wave of pure destruction.

Even so, I stopped it. What do you think of that? Nobody died; everyone survived the second Breath.

Now that I've stopped it twice, even the Greed-Gore can't ignore me. It swings its head around violently, as if to shake itself free of the chains wrapped around it.

I would be easily sent flying by the force of the Greed-Gore pulling on the end of the chains. I quickly return the chains to my hands, undoing the Greed-Gore's bindings.

"You finally turned around, huh. That's right, your opponent is me!"

The ominous, shining purple gaze pierces me. Honestly, being glared at by this enormous Rank 5 monster sends a chill down my spine; there's no life in its eyes at all.

But now I've finally figured a way to deal with this guy.

In my two hands I'm holding the [Absolute Malice Hatchet"Neck Cutter"] and [Hungering Wolf Sword"Evil Eater."] As well as the key tool I need to win this battle, the evolved [Black Chain Curse"Iron Cage."]

"Let's go!"

"Here we go! Nata-senpai! Wan-chan!"

I have a feeling that Histugi is using some outrageous nicknames, but I don't pay it any attention for now.

<TLN: In Japanese, 鉈/nata is hatchet and ワンちゃん/Wan-chan is a common "cute" way to refer to puppies – these nicknames are referring to the two weapons that Kurono is using, Nata-senpai for the hatchet and Wan-chan for the Hungering Wolf Sword.>

"Double Kuronagi."

First, I attack the tree-like leg before my eyes.

Evil Eater deals the initial blow.

The Greed-Gore's iron sand armor is being manipulated by the magnetic control of its lightning-element ability and the direct control of its earth-element ability – in other words, it's maintained by both of those abilities.

It's a powerful Characteristic Ability, but magic is still magic. If it's magical power, whether it's in the form of a magnetic field or direct control like telekinesis, Evil Eater will devour it.

The fang-blade is repelled by the Reactive Armor, but the Evil Eater's ability cuts out a large amount of the iron sand.

In the next moment, my second attack explodes – the cursed hatchet that surpasses the Evil Eater in sheer offensive power.

The damage dealt by the double Kuronagi is zero. However, I've succeeded in blowing away a portion of the iron sand covering one leg.

If I leave it now, the Greed-Gore will manipulate the iron sand again and its armor will be back to normal before I know it. But I already have a way to prevent that from happening.

“Blackening.”

That's right, I just have to steal all of this iron sand.

Since I'm holding weapons in both my hands, I leave Hitsugi to take up the fallen iron sand with her tentacles. Now that I think about it, this is the first time I'm using Blackening through the tentacles, but this should be easy enough for the evolved Hitsugi.

The dozens of tentacles are coming not from the gloves, but from my shadow. It's as if they're coming from the inside of my [Shadow Gate.]

I'm sure I look creepy with tentacles coming from my feet, but I don't care about something like that. Do as you want, Hitsugi.

“Foooh~ Gather up!”

Tentacles rise up and extend in every direction from my shadow, touching and absorbing the iron sand that's still in the air as well as the stuff that's fallen onto the

ground.

As if answering Hitsugi's call, the scattered iron sand immediately collects itself together to be absorbed by the tentacles.

Alright, the Blackening is quicker than I'd expected, and works in a wide area. This will work; with this method, it's not impossible to chip off all of this guy's armor.

I suppose I'll pick up the pace.

"Bullet Arts – Grenade Burst."

As I summon the [Wrath-Pun's Right Arm] and control it to make it float in the air, I fire.

Even though I invented the [Grenade Burst] recently, since I used it plenty before arriving here, I've become accustomed to using it. Nothing beats real battle experience.

The magical high-explosive projectiles strike the Greed-Gore's side, high above my head where my blade can't reach.

Monsters with a shell or carapace generally have thinner protection on their bellies than on their backs, but the Greed-Gore has its own belly well-covered with its versatile iron sand.

Black flames erupt from the iron wall that is the Greed-Gore's abdomen.

Even though the Greed-Gore's body is dozens of meters above me, I'm still within the blast radius. However, the majority of the heat is blocked by the [Nanablast Amulet] that I received from Fiona, so I have no hesitation in firing grenades even at short ranges as long as there aren't any allies nearby.

The explosion blows away a considerable amount of the iron sand armor. At the same time, the Greed-Gore's body tilts to one side significantly.

Were my attacks that powerful? No, that's not possible. This guy normally wouldn't even blink at this kind of explosion.

That means that it moved of its own accord. To be more specific, it is lashing out with

its tail in an attempt to crush me.

“UOH?!”

It's like a tower has just collapsed. In fact, the destructive power of the Greed-Gore's tail is equivalent or even greater than such an event.

I managed to avoid it by the width of a hair with a back-step, but the earth before my eyes rises up to form a wall.

If I get caught up in this, even though I'm wearing the demon's coat and blackened armor on my arms and legs, I'll be turned into a pancake by one hit. Each and every movement of a monster this size is a lethal attack.

“Sword Arts – Nameless Nine.”

As I land on the ground, I summon the cursed weapons. I'm sure these guys can shave off more of the iron sand armor with their cutting and stabbing attacks.

Including the [Wrath-Pun's Right Arm] , I'm controlling every weapon I have at my disposal, a total of ten weapons. At the same time, Hitsugi's tentacles are still twisting around, collecting the iron sand. My brain is on the verge of overheating from managing all of the magical formulas.

Even though I've received the [Concentration Boost] from Nell, this is my limit.

Dual-wielding the cursed hatchet and the Evil Eater, Blackening, managing the tentacles, magic bullets and magic weapons – If it weren't for the semi-independent nature of Hitsugi and the Nameless weapons, I wouldn't be able to use all of these simultaneously. I'm thankful for the will of the curses.

“Pierce it!”

“Go, newcomers!”

Hitsugi's shouting in a senpai-like tone is loud, but the Nameless weapons are following their own cursed, bloodthirsty instincts and dashing through the air.

And as if directly opposing me now, the Greed-Gore's enormous jaws are closing in on me.

Only a moment has passed since the curtain of dirt kicked up by its tail disappeared. It has transitioned from a tail swing into a biting attack with incredible speed. It attacks far faster than I would expect of a monster of this size.

The nine blades are scratching at the Greed-Gore's face, but that kind of attack won't stop it. I have no choice but to dodge this attack after all.

As the jaws large enough to devour both me and the ground I'm standing on whole close in with a fearsome biting attack, I dodge sideways – no, I have to jump straight up.

My legs want to retreat, but I harden my resolve, take a firm step forward and leap into the air. With my reconstructed, strengthened body and the effects of the Boost, a large leap impossible for a normal human is possible for me, but even so, the Greed-Gore's bared fangs pass below just a few dozen centimeters beneath my toes – it's a close call.

"Hitsugi!"

"Yes, Goshujin-sama!"

Hitsugi immediately understands what I intend to do and extends tentacles towards the Greed-Gore's body. The tentacles for Blackening and absorbing the iron sand are wire-like in shape, but these are the strong chain-shaped ones.

I've managed to leap into the air without having my legs torn off, and now I'm high enough to be able to look down on the Greed-Gore's back. One of Hitsugi's chains has wrapped itself around one of the rugged projections on the back of the Greed-Gore's body.

She pulls the chain in, causing my body to accelerate downwards rapidly, beyond the speed of free fall. A moment later, I'm standing on this huge monster's back.

It's like a pathway on top of a castle's wall. The width of the surface I'm standing on and the height from the ground make it difficult for me to believe that I'm standing on a living creature. I might feel the same thing if I were standing on a blue whale – no, I don't have time to be thinking such carefree thoughts.

Standing on this black, mountain-road-like back, I quickly grab onto it with both hands.

“Blackening!”

Now I forget about everything else and concentrate all of my focus and magical power into Blackening – Shit, as I thought, since I’m trying to use Blackening directly, it’s being resisted!

Covering it in black magical power works well, but right afterwards, purple lightning repels it and blows it away.

It seems that I can’t steal iron sand that’s still attached to its body.

“We’re going to be shaken off, Goshujin-sama!”

I know, Hitsugi. This guy isn’t going to let me ride on its back gently forever.

As if doing a sideways tackle on an invisible enemy, the Greed-Gore shakes its body violently. For me, standing on its back, it’s like experiencing a huge earthquake from the roof of a three-story building.

Unable to withstand this, I’m thrown off the Greed-Gore’s back.

Even as I spin through the air two or three times, I call the Nameless Nine back towards me and then order them to attack once more. As long as you shave off that iron sand, attack wherever you want, guys.

I give that command and land on the ground. I’ve been sent flying really far, so I end up rolling across the grassy meadows of the hills to minimize the damage. [Diablo’s Embrace] can handle this level of impact.

“I have no choice but to steadily shave off the rest of the iron sand, huh...”

The Greed-Gore and I face each other once more. Its body is still pitch-black; there are no visible gaps in its iron sand protection.

I think its armor has grown thinner, but if I don’t get rid of it all, my attacks won’t get through.

My opponent can kill me in a single blow, while I have to land hundreds and thousands of attacks just to get rid of one layer of its defense. A single mistake will be fatal; I’m constantly walking a dangerous tightrope.

I wonder how long it'll take for me to erase all of that iron sand armor. Will my ability to concentrate hold out for that long? And even if I manage to do it, I don't know if I'll be able to land an attack to finish it off afterwards... Even so, having that small chance at victory is better than nothing.

There's no simple way to tear off all of that iron sand in one go –

“... What?”

As if it has read my naïve thoughts, the Greed-Gore suddenly undoes its iron sand armor.

Starting from its snout, then the rest of its head, the back of its neck – the iron sand is released progressively downwards, finally stopping at its waist. The carapace of the upper half of its body is reddish-brown, while the lower half is still covered in black. I wonder what the Greed-Gore is planning to do, changing into this strange two-color combination.

Well, there's no need to wonder – of course, it's planning to attack.

“It's different from the Breath from before?!”

The iron sand that's fallen off gathers into a single mass at the Greed-Gore's mouth, from which purple lightning is surging out.

A moment later, as the ferocious mouth lined with sharp fangs opens, the mass of iron sand changes shape. It has turned into a sword. It's an orthodox double-edged sword, the kind you would see at any weapon store in Spada. It's pitch-black as if I'd used my Blackening on it, from the point down to the hilt, and it can be described as monster-sized.

And from this distance of several dozen meters, I can tell that its blade is filled with the fearsome power of a lightning strike.

This isn't a Breath; it's firing a black sword of lightning – this is the Greed-Gore's Sword Art.

“STOP IT WITH EVERYTHING YOU HAVE! HITSUGIIIIIIIIII!”

CHAPTER 339

BLACK AND WHITE BLADES

“STOP IT WITH EVERYTHING YOU HAVE! HITSUGIIIIIIIIII!”

This attack isn't something that I can avoid with a jump or a step. As I realize this, I put everything I have into defending against it.

“Please leave it to me, Goshujin-sama! Here I go –”

The defensive spell that I possess is the [Shield] spell, which hasn't changed since the times of the reconstruction experiments on me. Using this spell bare-handed just hardens the black magical power and produces only a low-class defensive spell.

In Hitsugi's hands, the shield is constructed using wire-shaped strands woven together, increasing its defensive ability and raising it to a medium-class spell.

And now, with the evolved [Black Chain Curse"Iron Cage"] , the shield's power should increase even more.

The shield is composed not of hardened wires made of black magical power, but chains of black steel that have absorbed the Greed-Gore's iron sand.

This is a new spell for me, but Hitsugi teaches me everything I need to know. Including the fact that this is no longer a mere [Shield.]

“– [Metal Shield!] ”

I produce a tough barrier that possesses the luster of real steel despite its pitch-black color. The rectangle that is large enough to cover my entire body is more like a solid lump of metal than a shield.

There are two chains forming a cross shape across the rectangular mass of heavy steel, contributing to its unrefined appearance. Of course, despite this appearance, it should definitely be as powerful as any other high-class defensive spell.

However, even this won't be enough to stop the Greed-Gore's sword of lightning – so I

think, but at this point, I'm out of time.

With a vicious howl that accompanies the roar of lightning, the Greed-Gore releases the sword of iron sand.

It moves too fast for me to even perceive with my eyes, just as I thought it would. I wonder if it's being accelerated through electromagnetic induction, like how a railgun works.

Either way, before I know it, the black blade has pierced through the shield of black steel.

Tearing the two chains to pieces at the point they intersect, it penetrates the steel wall.

Even so, the [Metal Shield] hasn't collapsed, and it hasn't allowed the attack to pass through completely. It's somehow managed to allow only half – no, two thirds of the blade through.

But that is still enough for the blade to reach my body.

However, I'm still unharmed. That's because I'm holding two more reliable shields in my hands.

The first is the [Hungering Wolf Sword"Evil Eater"] in my left hand.

Thanks to its magical power absorption, I've avoided taking damage from the fearsome electrical discharge from the sword's blade.

Unfortunately, the fang-blade wasn't able to withstand the sword's penetrative power; Evil Eater has been skewered by the black sword.

The Greed-Gore's blade broke through the shield and pierced the fang-blade, but what stopped the tip of the blade from reaching me is the [Absolute Malice Hatchet"Neck Cutter"] in my right hand.

Back when it was still [Stomach Render*] , it was pierced by the Eighth Apostle Ai's attack, but this time it has held firm. Not even a millimeter of the enemy's blade has reached my chest.

<*TLN: This was previously translated as Hara Retsu>

With my two weapons held out in front of me crossed over each other to form two more layers of defense, I've somehow managed to survive the attack.

It'd be bad if the Greed-Gore were to follow up on that attack now, I have to start a counterattack –

“Guh, haah... Shit...”

However, my body opposes my will to fight. I fall backwards to the ground, face-up.

“Goshujin-sama?! GOSHUJIN-SAMAAA!”

As I hear the maid's heartbroken cry echoing in my head, I feel the sensation of the ground hitting my back. My senses are really dull right now.

No, that's not right. I've gone numb.

Hitsugi and my weapons stopped the blade. Evil Eater prevented the electrical discharge from burning me to a crisp. However, that's all that my defense managed to do.

There's no doubt that I've received the Paralysis Status Effect that is an additional effect of lightning-element attacks.

During the mobility experiments, I experienced paralysis to some extent, but back then, it just slowed my movements a little. Right now, I can't even move the tip of a finger. My whole body is paralyzed.

The explosive, paralyzing electrical attack has caused my two weapons to fly out of my hands. They fall uselessly, their blades sinking into the ground.

“Goshujin-sama, please get a hold of yourself!”

I'm perfectly conscious, but my body isn't listening to me at all. Even though I can open my [Shadow Gate] , there's no way I can take a Potion from there and drink it.

The Morjura's aphrodisiac had no effect on my reconstructed, strengthened body; my resistance to drugs is high, and I should be far more resilient to Status Effects than the average human.

I think this full-body paralysis will pass in five minutes, but there's no way that the Greed-Gore will miss this opportunity.

Of course, I'm the one who chose to leave the fortress and engage in close-quarters combat. And there's no way that Nell's restorative magic can reach me from the fortress's walls.

This is really bad.

The Greed-Gore takes a step. Not towards the fortress, but towards me.

Ah, damn it, it looks like it wants to finish me off. In this state, while I can't move a single finger, there's nothing I can do –

“Oi, Tentacle Man, what are you doing here?”

Suddenly, the view of the sky that I have no choice but to look up at is interrupted. I see a young man looking down at – no, looking down on me.

I only have a vague memory of this handsome face, but from his black hair and crimson eyes, I can guess who he is.

If it were a cute face whose gender and age were ambiguous, I would assume that it is the divine Demon Lord, but since it's not, there's only one other person who it could be that has inherited that bloodline.

Nero Julius Elroad. Avalon's First Prince, and Nell's older brother.

It seems that my fate hasn't been decided just yet.



“Leave this guy to us! Nero, you get back to the fortress!”

As the Wrath-Pun is easily taken control of by the Parasite and begins to rise from the ground, Kai shouts these words at me.

He is normally a fool, but I can trust his quick decisions at times like this.

As we left Iskia Fortress, it was already on the verge of falling. With the Greed-Gore

headed there, they'll all be annihilated in less than five minutes.

Right now, at least one person has to get back – no, this guy won't let more than one of us get away from him in the first place. In any case, it's as clear as daylight that if one of us don't make it back to the fortress as soon as possible, it'll be too late.

Rather than me being chosen for this because I'm the leader, well, if you consider our abilities, then it's an appropriate decision. I'm the one who can get back to the fortress the quickest, too.

"Sorry. I'm counting on you."

"We've already beaten this thing once, it'll be a piece of cake! We'll take care of this quickly and head over there to back you up."

"Just make sure you come back before I finish the Greed-Gore off."

After this brief exchange, I turn back and head towards Iskia Fortress.

As I leave, Sharl and Safi look like they want to complain, but in this kind of emergency situation, even they won't say selfish things. They might pick a fight with me about it later, but I'll deal with that when the time comes.

The three of them hold the Wrath-Pun in place while I turn my mount around and quickly get away.

"[Speed High-Boost.] – أَسْرَعُ! تَشْغِيلُ الْقَدَمِ سُرْعَةً خِلَالِ مَنْ يَعْملُ"

The running Unicorn speeds up as I cast my strengthening spell, and at the same time, the wind currents surrounding us begin to deflect this annoying rain. What a handy side-effect.

When Kai, Safi and I were hurrying to get to Sharl earlier, I was moving about this fast. Well, for an adventurer, this is pretty fast, but now that I'm on my own, I can go a bit faster.

"– [Sonic Walker.] "

I use the martial arts technique that grants the fastest movement. It's one of the higher-class techniques in modern magic, or at least among known martial arts

techniques.

The two speed-boosting effects, the spell as well as the martial arts technique, increase my speed by more than double. The only people capable of reaching this speed are probably the small portion of adventurers who excel in horse-riding techniques, or the elite knights of Spada.

This increase in speed requires the caster to have considerable ability, but requires even more from the mount – the mount must be talented.

“The only one who can keep up with my full power is you.”

That’s right; mounts other than this Unicorn wouldn’t be able to withstand my double speed-boost.

I saved this Unicorn from poachers who had captured it in the Asbel mountain range, just before I moved to Spada to study, I guess.

I hadn’t accepted a quest to destroy that poaching organization; it was really just a pure coincidence.

Unicorns are famous for only allowing maidens to ride them, but to think that I’d be the one to prove that they’ll let men ride them too if they’re tamed properly.

Back then, I thought it was annoying for getting so attached to me, but now I have accepted it as my companion, the only one who can move at the speed that I desire.

Thanks to this Unicorn, I’m able to make it back to Iskia Fortress in half the time it would otherwise take me.

“Good, the fortress hasn’t fallen yet. Wait, where have all the monsters gone?”

I can only see corpses of various sizes on the ground; the large army of monsters that were advancing on the fortress has completely disappeared. It’s impossible that they’ve invaded the fortress and are all now inside there.

But what’s even more impossible is for the monsters to have been wiped out without us. If we had that much fighting power, we wouldn’t have accepted the plan to defend the fortress in the first place.

So then, this situation – why is the Greed-Gore rampaging around in front of the fortress all by itself?

I have a vague suspicion, but I don't want to accept that suspicion as true. However, seeing the reality with my own eyes, I have no choice but to take it in.

“Nell, you used the [Radiance Exile...] ”

The one standing on top of the half-destroyed fortress walls, holding the [Scale of White Wings] as if to say that she'll never back down, is undeniably my younger sister.

Why are you here? And how did you even come all the way out here in the first place?

There are too many questions I want to ask, but what's done is done. And the reason that she would do something so reckless is obvious as well.

I'm sure she heard about the danger closing in on Iskia Fortress from the messenger that Will sent out. Upon receiving such news, I'm sure she wouldn't be able to sit still and do nothing.

Me and her other companions of Wing Road were here. Three hundred students from the academy as well. This is Nell, who would accept a bandit elimination quest in order to save a few female students who have been attacked by bandits. There's no way that she would do nothing.

Even so, I didn't want her to come here. It's just too dangerous.

“Well, I can't do anything about it now that she's here. She's swept away all the other monsters, so all I have to do is finish this guy off.”

And as I get close enough to the Greed-Gore to challenge it –

“Tch, that guy is...”

The Greed-Gore fires the same greatsword of iron sand that it fired at the Wrath-Pun. Its target is not me, but the man who is fighting it on his own right now.

He instantly uses a defensive spell that creates a large, black shield, but the shield is pierced and he collapses onto the ground. For a guy who challenged the Greed-Gore on his own, he looks pretty pathetic.

If it were just an academy student or one of the adventurers who came out for the rescue effort, that's all that I'd think of him.

But this guy, this man is –

“Oi, Tentacle Man, what are you doing here?”

Kurono, why are you here, of all people?

I climb down from my Unicorn and look down at the face of the unsightly Kurono lying on the ground.

“... Fu.”

He laughed. Oi, is he making fun of me? Did you think I wouldn't know? The one who brought Nell all the way here is you, isn't it?

I don't see any of his other allies; the only ones who weren't at the fortress when I left it are Nell and Kurono.

Nell isn't capable of an attack that could have broken through the ring of monsters surrounding the fortress. Therefore, the only one who could have possibly rushed here is Kurono.

In other words, without this guy, Nell couldn't have made it all the way out here even if she'd wanted to.

Just how much will this man get on my nerves before he's satisfied? Should I kill him – shit, calm down, I don't have time to deal with this guy right now, right?

“You just stay there and sleep, I'm going to take care of that guy. Don't you get in my way.”

Well, he's probably under the same full-body paralysis that Sharl was hit by earlier, so he won't be able to do anything anyway.

Unlike Nell, I'm not nice to everyone. I'm not going to go out of my way to give him a Potion.

Speaking of Nell, she's looking flustered, looking as if she wants to fly down over here

from the fortress's walls... Is she that worried about me fighting the Greed-Gore on my own?

For now, it seems that Will is doing his best next to her to calm her down. Please keep stopping her.

Since Nell is anxious and all, I suppose it's time that I put an end to the Greed-Gore.

This is a Rank 5 monster, an enemy I can't let my guard down against, and the original plan was to fight it with four people.

Having to fight it on my own is such a pain. The thought of just trying to buy some time crosses my mind, but –

“You hurt Sharl. I'm not going to be satisfied until I cut you down myself.”

CHAPTER 340

LIGHTNING LORD KNIGHT

According to Sharl, the Greed-Gore is capable of using powerful lightning-element abilities because it's been infected by a Rank 5 parasite monster.

I don't have any doubts about this theory. There's no mistake that the parasite boss responsible for spawning the monster army is hiding inside this guy's head.

In that case, it would be best to have Nell cast a spell that cures the parasite's Status Effect, but she's already used [Radiance Exile] , so I'm worried about how much magical power she has left. In fact, considering that she hasn't run empty and collapsed, her magical power reserves are impressive.

But after that, it's surely impossible for her to cast a restorative spell powerful enough to destroy the parasite monster that's able to freely control the Greed-Gore and make a huge monster army. Even if she used a Hi-Potion to recover, limits are a thing.

In any case, since I can't rely on Nell, I have to do something on my own.

I'll go all out from the beginning, just this one time.

As I dash forwards with the still-active [Sonic Walker] , I draw my beloved blade from its sheath at my waist – the [Spirit Blade"White King Cherry Blossom."]

When Nell and I moved to Spada to study, Dad gave us each one item from the national treasury.

Nell received the [Scale of White Wings] , and I got the [Spirit Blade"White King Cherry Blossom."]

But that was just officially giving me permission to use it, a kind of formality. I've actually been using this thing since I was a kid. This is the first blade that I ever pulled from a sheath.

The [Spirit Blade"White King Cherry Blossom"] from Avalon's national treasury dates back to the ancient times and is famous for choosing its owner. It harbors a spirit with

its own will, which is why it's called a [Spirit Blade.]

If you're not chosen, you can't unsheathe it. Dad couldn't draw it, and neither could his dad, nor that guy's dad. In the hundred generations of the Elroad royal family, apparently only a handful of worthy masters have appeared.

Basically, I'm the first worthy master to appear for several hundred years. Well, I'm not conscious about that at all; I just pulled it normally and it came out of the sheath. It's not like I can hear a voice from the sword like a cursed weapon or anything. I'm not even sure if there's actually a spirit resting in the blade.

However, it's definitely a legendary blade worthy of being known as an item from the national treasury. This weapon's abilities are extraordinary. Of course it has the simple sharpness of a blade, but it also possesses magical effects that even staves can't compare to. And they fit me perfectly, as if I'd had it custom-ordered.

"Instant Flash."

First, a light pre-emptive strike.

The martial art that combines the light and wind attributes releases a faintly glowing, white slash from my blade.

Right now, the Greed-Gore's black iron sand is covering only the lower half of its body, and it doesn't even cover the back half of its tail. I'm guessing Kurono shaved it off; if you're going to do that, can't you get rid of all of it instead of getting defeated and leaving things only halfway done?

For now, I'm aiming at the head, where the defense is a layer thinner. The blade of magic lets out a high-pitched noise as it hits the brick-red carapace right between the Greed-Gore's brows.

My attack is powerful enough to cut a Rank 3 monster clean in half, but against such a huge opponent, the only effect it has is to cause its head to move slightly.

But it's not completely unharmed. There's definitely a line-shaped mark in the rock-like carapace.

Nice, I can cut it as long as the iron sand isn't there. I can't cut it in half with one attack, but as long as I have the [Spirit Blade "White King Cherry Blossom"] and my sword

techniques, I can slay it.

“Oops, are you angry that I’ve put a scratch on the carapace that you’re so proud of?”

With my back facing the fortress, the Greed-Gore in front of me lets out a growl and suddenly gives a sign that it’s going to attack.

The iron sand flies off the lower half of its body and spreads out like mist, but in the next moment, it has changed into numerous sword-shaped projectiles, suspended in mid-air.

I heard from Sharl that it stole the idea for its enormous iron-sand greatsword attack from her [Lightning Spada], but these are normal longsword-sized blades.

I see hundreds of pointed blades floating in mid-air, aiming at me with menacing purple lightning around them, but I have a good feeling about this.

A loud crackling sound echoes out, signaling the simultaneous launch of the projectiles.

It’s a torrential rain of swords. It’s aimed over a broad area, but with this number of projectiles, there are no gaps in between that I can use to dodge.

In that case, I have to make my own gap.

“Haste!”

I dash forwards and make a slash in front of me.

It repels one of the black longswords completely. From the fact that the sword isn’t broken in half and only a small amount of iron sand has chipped off from it, I can tell that the iron sand that makes up the swords is packed quite densely.

If I were using any other sword, mine would have been the one to break.

As I think this, I manage to pass through the wide-area barrage of black swords. I’m sure that was your best attack that you used all of your remaining iron sand for. That’s too bad.

“– ?!”

But my sixth sense warns me of danger.

The swords that had only cut empty air without even scratching me sank deeply into the muddy, wet ground and stopped moving – or so I thought.

“Tch, so it’s not a fire-and-forget attack!”

As if pulled from the ground by invisible soldiers, the black iron sand swords rise back into the air. Their target is my back, of course.

Theoretically, after that kind of attack, one shouldn’t have the ability to control the projectiles again after firing, but I guess this should be expected from a Rank 5 opponent.

No, this isn’t the time to be admiring it. If I don’t make an appropriate move here, I won’t be able to block this attack.

I turn around. Holding my sword in my right hand, I hold out my empty left hand in front of me.

The spell I cast is one of my originals.

“– Bloom, [Snow Moon Flower.] ”

Blue light appears on the back of my left hand to form a magic circle.

In the next moment, a sword of ice surrounded by a freezing aura forms. It’s so transparent that it should be called crystal, rather than ice.

Its length is the same as a regular sword, but its blade is thin, like a rapier.

Dual-wielding this Force Edge* created using modern magic and the physical sword [Spirit Blade”White King Cherry Blossom”] is my true battle style.

<TLN*: The kanji below this reads “blade of light”; I think Force Edges in the KnM universe refers to magic blades in general.>

Since I have an affinity for every element except darkness, I can freely change the element of the sword in my left hand to take on any enemy.

And the [Spirit Blade"White King Cherry Blossom"] has the effect of strengthening every element. With this weapon, I have no need for a staff or wand.

"Ice Seal Flash."

As the black swords close in on me once more, this time I face them with the sword of ice.

My sword of magic reacts to my self-taught martial art, and the freezing aura surrounding its blade grows larger. From an outsider's point of view, at this moment, the blade probably looks like it's doubled in size.

As I swing with my sword of ice, [Snow Moon Flower] , the enemy blades that are on a trajectory towards my body are repelled like before.

The blade of crystal ice strikes the masses of iron sand, but the sound produced as they collide is as high-pitched as the sound of steel swords clashing. Shining, blue-white particles linger in the air.

"Freeze."

The swords that have been in contact with this freezing blade can't move anymore.

All of the black swords that I repelled are surrounded by heavy ice and fall to the ground. The earth is wet with rain, and that moisture is frozen as well, trapping the iron sand swords in prisons of ice on the dirt.

Sealing whatever it cuts in ice – that is the power of the [Ice Seal Flash.]

Normally, the ones who use Force Edges are mages, not swordsmen. They're mainly used in emergency situations when the user is forced into close-quarters combat; one could say that it's a minor offensive magic that's not often used in real battles.

Therefore, there are few that can use martial arts with Force Edges, which are magical swords. At the very least, I've never seen a single other person able to do so.

There's nobody to teach me something like this, so I invented it myself. This is one of my originals.

Fire, water, ice, wind, lightning, earth and lastly, the light element that I'm most

proficient with. The Force Edges of seven elements, and martial arts made specifically for each of them.

They are all my originals, and together, I have named them [Blade Skills.]

Possessing both swords and magic – no, implementing the use of magic with my swordsmanship – this is why I call myself a member of this class. The [Lord Knight*] class.

<TLN*: The kanji below this odd-sounding English name is “magic swordsman”.>

Ever since I came to Spada, I’ve never used [Blade Skills] in front of people except when on high-difficulty quests, but when I was in Avalon, well, there were various occasions where people saw it.

Because of that, people started calling me by the embarrassing nickname [Lightning Lord Knight], but... I don’t care about that. By the time I graduate and return to Avalon, everyone will have forgotten about it.

Now then, more importantly, the Greed-Gore.

“Now that it can’t control its weapons anymore, it’s panicked and gone on the defensive, huh.”

There is no third storm of iron sand that comes towards me, and the rest of the swords return to the Greed-Gore to become its armor once more. But it’s lost multiple swords’ worth of iron sand, and the area covered by the armor has been reduced.

“You can’t defend against my attacks fully with that – Instant Flash!”

I aim for its brow as I did earlier. This second attack should create a cross on its stone forehead with the mark from the first one – tch, it’s been blocked.

The meagre amount of iron sand that remains moves up to its forehead at high speed like a crawling Slime, focusing its defense at the target of my attack. A black spray scatters around, but no more damage is done.

I see, it’s capable of precise, high-speed control as well. It’s quite an amazing Characteristic Ability.

“But it’s not enough – Flying Ice Seal Flash!”

I throw the [Snow Moon Flower] in my left hand.

The magic sword of ice is released from my hand as a long distance spell, powerful enough to rival the high-class offensive spell [Aiz Fortis Sagita.]

With my throwing martial art, the sword of ice covered in the freezing, sealing aura flies in a straight line, closing in on its target with the speed of an arrow.

The air that it’s soaring through is filled with large raindrops. Freezing the raindrops directly above it along its path, the [Flying Ice Seal Flash] leaves a white trail behind it.

And true to its aim, the sword of ice strikes the forehead covered in iron sand. It creates a pure-white, freezing explosion like a blooming flower.

With this, the last of the iron sand has been sealed.

The Greed-Gore’s head, including the black armor, is frozen solid and the spreading cold air forms a thin layer of ice on the surface of the rest of its body. It’s black, red-brown and white, what a mess.

Well, soon it’ll be covered in red that’ll be the end.

Other than the head that’s covered in black armor, my all-out martial arts with the [Spirit Sword”White King Cherry Blossom”] should be able to cut through any part of its body. It’ll take some effort and it’ll be a pain, but this is checkmate for the Greed-Gore.

“Lone Flash.”

The martial art I release is a long-range attack, like the [Instant Flash.] Since it needs some time to prepare, it’s not the kind of attack that can be performed at a moment’s notice.

However, the power possessed by the [Lone Flash] compensates for the opening that it creates for the enemy to attack me.

The slashing light released from my blade is larger and brighter than that of the

[Instant Flash.] The flash of light that seems to cut apart the very air strikes not the Greed-Gore's heavily-defended head, but its neck.

It sounded like a groan of anguish came from that large mouth, but it's drowned out by the sounds of destruction as the white light cuts into the stone carapace.

Before long, the intense flickering of light stops, and a crack is left near the back of the Greed-Gore's neck.

It's still not enough to draw blood, huh. But how many more of these attacks can you endure?

At last, I step forward until the Greed-Gore is right in front of me. If I use the [Lone Flash] at this point-blank distance, it'll destroy this carapace for sure.

My sword is already in the air, and the preparation I need for the attack is already complete.

"This is the end –"

"– Kurono-kun!"

In this moment, I have no idea what's happening. I don't understand.

Nell, why are you there?

I'm right in front of the Greed-Gore, and right behind its enormous body – no, already by its feet, is Nell.

Impossible. Nell is of the Priest class; her place is always at the back of the party. It's impossible for her to make the ridiculous mistake of being in a position right next to the enemy.

What's wrong, Nell? I know you have a gentle personality not suited for battle, but surely you have a sufficient understanding of the fundamentals of combat. The time that you've spent as an adventurer is proof of that.

You're supposed to have the composure to never lose yourself during a battle, aren't you?

So why are you doing something so foolish as coming out to the front lines as a priest

–

“Kuro-no-ku~n!”

No, what’s more unbelievable is that Nell is calling that man’s name.

“Nell, you... What did Kuro-no do to you –”

I’m dumbfounded, but the crackling sound of thunder returns me to reality.

“Wha –”

Sending the thin, white ice covering its whole body flying, the Greed-Gore raises its head. It opens its large mouth and takes a deep breath that causes its chest to expand.

It’s preparing for a Breath.

“Nell, run!”

Nell runs straight under the Greed-Gore, between its legs, trying to get in front of it.

Nell’s right in front of me now; I’m sure my shouted words reached her.

However, right now, she takes no notice of my voice or the bloodthirst of the Greed-Gore preparing its Breath right behind her.

The only thing you can see in your eyes right now is the pathetic, collapsed man behind me, huh.

“Damn it – [Snow Moon Flower!] ”

Summoning the sword of ice in my left hand once more, I sheathe the blade in my right hand.

Nell has lost herself completely; I have no choice but to stop the Breath. Of course, it’s my duty to stop my sister when she’s messing around like this.

As Nell tries to run past me without even glancing my way, I stop her with my now-free right hand.

“Nell, don’t move!”

“No! Let go, let go of me! Kurono-kun is –”

She’s gone mad, like she’s under a Charm.

Holding Nell’s abdomen with my right arm, I lift her up onto my shoulder with a single movement.

She thrashes her arms and legs violently and desperately tries to escape my grasp, but I can’t let her go.

She’s scratching my cheeks with her nails. Her white wings are flailing about, hitting my head hard.

Even so, I can’t let her go!

“الجبلة عملاقة الجليد يدوم نبع” [Aiz Algalea Shield!] ”

I cast a high-class, ice-element defensive spell.

As I thrust the [Snow Moon Flower] into the ground, an enormous shield of ice rises out of the ground.

Using the [Snow Moon Flower] to cast the spell as well as using a Short Chant further shortens the amount of time the spell needs to cast, while also reducing the decrease in defensive power that results from shortening the chant.

A Dual Shield is impossible; this is the best defense that I can produce in this moment.

As the spell completes, the Breath is released from the Greed-Gore’s mouth.

All I can see is a blinding purple flash of light beyond the transparent shield of ice –

CHAPTER 341

KURONO VS GREED-GORE (1)

“No! He’s been paralyzed!”

Seeing Kurono take the greatsword fired by the Greed-Gore head-on and then fall onto the ground, Wilhart shouts from atop the fortress’s walls.

The black shield that Kurono produced was quite powerful, but not enough to completely block the attack.

Wilhart knows that that attack was just like Charlotte’s lethal technique, [Lightning Spada.] Therefore, he immediately understands just how powerful it was.

Seeing Kurono suddenly being pushed into such a desperate situation, Wilhart begins to panic.

“Ah, no! KURONO-KUN!”

However, the fact that there is someone panicking even more than him – no, someone who has gone half-mad, somehow calms him down.

“P-Princess Nell...?”

Next to Wilhart is his childhood friend, a person he is very familiar with – Nell Julius Elroad.

Princess Nell has shown herself to be extremely gifted at magic through the spell she used to treat Simon which only took a moment to cast, and the [Lux Rampart Defan] that blocked that ridiculous Breath earlier.

But why has she lost her composure like this now?

With Nell displaying an expression and emotions that Wilhart has never seen from her in over ten years of knowing her, he is dumbfounded and forgets about the danger right before their eyes – almost. He has no time for that.

“Kurono-kun!”

“Nuaaah?! You can’t do that, Princess Nell!”

Wilhart quickly grabs onto the arm of Nell, who raises her wings and prepares to dive down from the fortress.

“Let me go!”

“C-calm down! It’s far too dangerous for a Priest to go to the battlefield! And Kurono has only been paralyzed, it is not as if he has been heavily wounded – huh?!”

In the middle of his speech, a loud slap explodes across Wilhart’s cheek.

That white, soft hand that is supposed to heal people instead strikes his face hard and leaves a bright red mark. It is so forceful that it sends his monocle flying.

It hurts, but if Wilhart didn’t grab onto the arm whose hand is holding the staff, he would likely have received a blow from the staff that comes from Avalon’s national treasury.

If the Orichalcum staff struck his face, he would be helpless. He is very fortunate that he received only a slap.

“Ah, look! Nero has come back!”

At that moment, right behind where Kurono has collapsed, Wilhart sees a Unicorn dashing forward like a gust of wind.

As to be expected from the literal prince on a white horse, Nero Julius Elroad. He has returned with perfect timing.

“Now that Nero is here, it will be fine! No, it might be impossible for him alone, but I am sure that Kurono will recover from his paralysis soon and the two of them will be able to defeat the Greed-Gore!”

Wilhart remembers all too well that Nero has the worst possible impression of Kurono after the incident in the dining hall.

In fact, it seems that Nero has no intention of healing Kurono with a Potion and has

merely spoken a few words to him. Wilhart can guess that he said something along the lines of, "Don't get in my way."

But even so, Wilhart believes that once Kurono recovers and the two of them are fighting at the front line, they will surely cooperate with this enormous foe before them – perhaps not, but they should at least be able to fight without getting in each other's way.

He trusts in Kurono's strength, but beyond that, he has known Nero for a long time and knows just how powerful his abilities are. He truly believes that if the two of them joined forces, no enemy would stand a chance.

And then, as Wilhart expected, Nero leaves Kurono where he is and begins fighting the Greed-Gore.

Nero's movements and attacks demonstrate the power worthy of a Rank 5.

That man who finds everything bothersome is even unleashing his [Blade Skills] ; Wilhart can tell just how serious he is.

It is even possible that at this rate, he will defeat the Greed-Gore on his own. The other students lined up on these fortress walls have likely realized this now as well.

They cheer loudly, as if they are spectating a one-on-one battle between two star gladiators. Finally, victory is within sight.

However, Nell lets out a dark whisper.

"This... can't happen..."

"W-what do you mean, what can't happen? At this rate he's going to defeat –"

"The one who saves Kurono... HAS TO BE ME!"

Wilhart is too late to realize what is going on.

As Nell shakes her arm free, Wilhart reaches out to try and grab onto it once more.

However, Nell has already leapt off the fortress's walls.

Her pure-white wings and priest's clothes flutter gently in the wind. Her flowing black hair gives off a bright white gleam.

The scene is just like something one would see in an ancient painting of an angel's descent. Leaving that impression on the people watching her from behind, Nell flies towards Kurono.

"Princess Nell, just what happened between you and Kurono..."

Even Wilhart's brain cannot come up with an immediate answer to this question.



"Ah... Kuh, ugh..."

Seeing Nell fly down from the fortress's walls, I wanted to scream, but my voice didn't come out.

Damn it, even my tongue's gone numb; I can't speak properly. Even though I can open my trembling lips, I can't form any words with meaning and just end up letting out long breaths.

This is bad, I have to stop Nell. A sense of impatience spurs me on.

It's my fault that Nell, a Rank 5 priest adventurer is doing something risky like flying right in front of the enemy just to heal me.

This thought definitely isn't just conceit on my part.

Because I let down my guard at the very last moment in my battle against Saeed's Demon Eyes, Nell doesn't have full trust in my abilities. It's the same reason a mother wouldn't let her child out of her sight.

I don't have a deep connection or relationship with Nell like a child would have with his mother. We're just friends, and we only became close recently.

But even though our relationship is only like that, it's just like her for her to act without thinking about her own life.

She's kind, no; her good nature should be called *too* kind. The short time that I've

known her has been enough for me to understand that.

“Sh... Shit...”

That’s why I’m angry at myself for being so worthless. I challenged the Greed-Gore with so much spirit, but this is the state that I’ve ended up in.

If Nero didn’t show up, I would have either been chewed to pieces and be in the Greed-Gore’s stomach, or stepped on and turned into a red stain on the ground right about now.

But now, I can’t even regret how pathetic I am or be happy that my life has been saved.

Showing off his rumored ability, Nero cornered the Greed-Gore with an amazing combination of sword and magic techniques, but Nell’s actions have turned the situation around completely.

The older brother stops his younger sister as she rushes out. The Greed-Gore hasn’t let this opportunity slip away.

It’s very cunning for a monster. It looks like it’s chosen a Breath attack, knowing that there’s no way to avoid it in these circumstances.

“– [Aiz Algalea Shield!] ”

As Nero summons an enormous shield of ice, the Greed-Gore spits fire – no, lightning from its mouth.

This isn’t the Plasma Breath that destroyed half of the fortress’s walls, but the lightning-element Thunder Breath.

As if all of the lightning that should be coming down from this rainy sky has gathered into one spot, a bright torrent of purple lightning engulfs the two siblings of Avalon’s royal family.

As the loud, crackling noise of thunder echoes out, purple light fills the Iskia Hills. I close my eyes instinctively, but I can still see the brightness through my eyelids.

However, it’s over in an instant. The Breath was probably only fired for a few seconds.

As I open my eyes again, wondering if Nell is safe, I see two silhouettes standing in front of me.

It seems that Nero managed to block the Thunder Breath, but the shield of ice produced by the high-class defensive spell crumbles into pieces.

A direct hit was avoided, but some of the electricity might have gone through.

I can't tell how much damage Nero took from here, but even so, I manage to see that he has chosen to discontinue fighting and escape with Nell in his arms.

With a side-step, Nero avoids the Greed-Gore's biting attack that comes almost immediately after the Breath ends with his sister still on his shoulder.

As the large mouth lined with sword-like fangs bites into the earth, Nero lands back on the ground and makes a dash for it, running past the Greed-Gore.

He heads for Iskia Fortress, where Nell leapt down from. Indeed, it's impossible to fight with her down here.

No, it's likely that Nero can't keep fighting like he was earlier.

His running is slow. It's impossible for the cause of this to be that his martial art has worn off or that Nell is heavy.

Most importantly, the left hand that was holding his magic sword of ice is now limp. It's been paralyzed completely.

With Nell in that state, I'm sure she can't use a restorative spell right away, and there's no time to drink a Potion.

The Greed-Gore immediately turns around and begins chasing the two of them. Like a cat playing with a mouse, it somehow seems like it's enjoying itself now.

Seeing Nero's current state, I don't think he can run any faster. I'm sure the paralysis has spread to his legs; it's impressive that he's still running about as fast as an ordinary person's full-speed sprint.

But I can see that at that speed, the Greed-Gore will catch up to him soon. The fortress is right in front of him, but the hundred meter distance might as well be a million.

Sensing danger, Will has given an order, causing a covering fire of arrows to be released from the fortress's walls, but it doesn't slow the Greed-Gore down at all. Even though the iron sand armor is now only covering its neck, its rock carapace is enough to block the arrows.

I'm the only one who can do something about this.

But the problem is that my whole body's paralyzed – no, that's not the problem, the Blackening is.

Are you not done, Hitsugi, haven't you finished Blackening this iron sand greatsword yet?

"I'm finished, Goshujin-sama~!"

A happy voice filled with a sense of accomplishment echoes out inside my head, as if asking to be praised.

Nice, well done, now I can move freely.

I'm affected by full-body paralysis, but I have no problems using magic. Instead of my hands and arms, I can use Hitsugi's countless, flexible tentacles to take out Potions or anything else from my shadow.

The reason that I didn't do that and cure myself the moment I collapsed from the paralysis was the fact that this greatsword was still rattling and moving, trying to continue attacking.

When Nero appeared, I sensed that it was going to aim at his back next, so I couldn't undo my shield spell.

I transformed the pierced [Metal Shield] into tentacles and began wrapping themselves around the sword to begin Blackening it right away, but taking over this heavy mass of iron sand that was still under the control of a powerful Characteristic Ability, took me until now to complete.

Well, the one casting Blackening is me, but when I'm casting it through the medium of Hitsugi's tentacles, her ability has an effect as well. The effectiveness of Blackening is less than when I'm in direct contact with the object I'm using it on.

However, the Blackening is finished now. As Hitsugi absorbs the iron sand that I've taken control of, I open the [Shadow Gate] and a single tentacle searches inside it.

If I'm not mistaken, I don't happen to be carrying a Potion to cure paralysis. Err, it's a little bit of a waste, but I'll use the [Fairies' Miracle Medicine.]

"Hmm~ Is it this one?"

Yes, it's that one wrapped in a white package, hurry, there's no time.

"Here I go, Goshujin-sama! Hee~ere!"

I hear a tired-sounding shout as a shining powder of light is thrown onto my face -
Cough! Cough!

"You dumbass! What kind of medicine do you apply onto the face?!"

"Hyieh~ I'm sorry, Goshujin-sama!"

I scold the silly maid as I stand up – the fact that I can do this means that I've recovered from the paralysis completely. As to be expected of Lily's medicine.

I don't have time to be admiring its incredible effectiveness. For now, I have to stop the Greed-Gore.

Before I've even come up with a plan, I'm already running at full speed.

I don't have any martial arts or strengthening spells, but don't underestimate how fast my legs can carry me. My body wasn't reconstructed and strengthened for nothing.

Now then, the question is what to do from here. Even if I wanted to stop the Greed-Gore, it's not like I have some kind of secret plan to do so.

The only thing I can do is the straightforward method of stopping it by force.

It seems ridiculous for me to take on this enormous, mountain-like opponent, but with Hitsugi here, it shouldn't be impossible.

"Please leave it to me, Goshujin-sama!"

Of course, I use the [Anchor Hands] that have now become steel chains – these are no longer mere tentacles.

This evolved ability has established itself as one of my new techniques, worthy of joining the ranks of my [Bullet Arts] and [Sword Arts.]

“Seize it! [Bind Arts!] ”

Bundles of black chains are released from both of my hands.

Each and every one of them are accurately controlled by Hitsugi, and they sway back and forth in the air like snakes attacking their prey before winding themselves around the Greed-Gore’s tail.

Its tail that’s like a tower made of bricks is covered in the rugged carapace, providing sufficient grip for the chains to attach themselves onto.

And as Hitsugi carefully ties the chain-tentacles together in knots, they become a snare that cannot be escaped from unless the chains themselves are broken.

I dropped Neck Cutter and Evil Eater earlier and didn’t manage to retrieve them. I use my empty hands to grip the chains firmly, as if I’m playing tug of war.

From here on out, it’s a pure contest of strength.

“Force Boost.”

The effect of this spell lasts for less than twenty seconds. But this Boost that I learned directly from Nell compensates for the brevity of its duration with its overwhelming effect on my physical strength.

The [Force Boost] that uses my first divine protection, the black flames, as the source of its power grants my arms that are pulling the chains even greater physical strength – but it’s not enough.

“UOOOH?!”

The chains are wrapped around the Greed-Gore’s tail, and I’m pulling them. Maybe this was to be expected, but I’m the one being pulled forward.

I'm being dragged forward, as if I'm water-skiing. The heels of my feet that I'm planting into the ground are gouging out the dirt, scattering the carpet of weeds and mud everywhere.

The Greed-Gore's footsteps don't stop; in fact, it still hasn't even noticed that I'm here.

"Force Boost!"

If I lack strength, then I need more. I'll burn more of my magical energy and turn it into strength.

Think back to the fruitless training that I did before Nell taught me. Back then, I had enough heat stored up inside my body that I was on the verge of exploding.

Right now, I need that violent, explosive power. I don't need control; I just need it to work.

As long as the bare minimum of the spell formula remains, the strengthening magic can be cast.

I don't need that complicated detailed spell formula that Nell showed me through telepathy. Since I'm self-taught, I'll always be one who learns by watching others.

I imagine the spell formula as a channel in my body. It's arranged with various divergences and convergences that prevent the burning magical power flowing through it from overflowing.

But right now, I break that spell formula that governs the flow of magical power.

I don't care what kind of reaction my body will have. Right now, I just want power!

"FORCE! BOOOOOOOOOST!"

I feel like I heard something snap. At the same time, a white-hot pain shoots up both of my arms.

But they don't lose their strength. They won't lose their strength, no matter what. I've finally felt some kind of response, there's no way I can let go here!

The chains creak, as if they're screaming.

I feel like the force that's pulling me forward becomes just a little weaker. A little more, with just a little more my strength will be able to compete with the Greed-Gore's.

"Goshujin-sama, any more than this is dangerous! Your arms will tear apart!"

Shut up, be quiet. I'm well aware of that.

Something that looks like red smoke is coming out from the gaps in the black armguards that I'm wearing on both arms. This ominous mist that looks like the evaporation of my blood is definitely a consequence of the burden my arms are under.

But so what? It's not enough, I still don't have enough power.

If I don't stop this guy, Nell is going to die.

I've saved Will, and Simon is at least still alive. I'm going to save Nell as well.

I'm not going to let anyone else die; I swore I would protect everyone. I'll never give up; I swore to god – no, to the Demon King – that I will protect everyone this time.

With the divine protection of the legendary Demon King, this can't be all the power that I have. So give me more, give me –

"GIVE ME THE DEMON KING'S POWEEEEEEEEEEER!"

"I said it before, didn't I? Even though it's a divine protection, that power belongs to you, Kuro no Maou. Look, your arms already possess the power of the Demon King. But let's see, I suppose I can at least tell you what it's called –"

I suddenly hear a familiar voice. Before I even register the meaning of the words, my mouth is already saying the name that I'm being taught.

The true title of the first divine protection.

"OVERDRIVE!"

CHAPTER 342

KURONO VS GREED-GORE (2)

Ah, I see, this is the real way of using the divine protection.

The first divine protection isn't something that artificially changes my black magical power into the fire element. This is just the first step of the process needed to release its full power.

Creating the spell formula for [Force Boost] in this way without any consideration for the danger of my arms being blown off or my body exploding is the [correct] way to activate this divine protection.

If I wasn't in this situation, I would never do this; this is a dangerous spell formula that I should never use.

And now I've finally figured out how to activate the divine protection. No, this situation might have forced me to figure it out. Because Nell taught me this method of strengthening myself, and because she is now in danger.

That's why I'm going to use this power to save her.

“OVERDRIVE!”

The first divine protection is unleashed.

The clasps of the armguards on both of my arms fly off instantly. The sleeve of [Diablo's Embrace] that covers my left arm flutters so violently that it looks like it's going to be torn apart.

The sleeve of my right arm is still destroyed from my battle with Saeed; without the armguard my arm would be completely naked.

The blood vessels on this arm form shining red lines that run all the way to my fingertips. They glow so brightly that I can see the light through my gloves.

And then a crest of flames forms on the back of my hand. In the moment this magic

circle of red light that signals the activation of the divine protection appears, a burning, flaming, bright-red aura bursts out from my arms.

If there was ever a Demon King of flames*, I'm sure he would have arms like these.

<TLN*: The kanji below "Overdrive" actually read "Demon King of flames">

But it's not just their appearance that is flashy. Right now, my arms possess a power that my self-taught [Force Boost] can't even compare to.

Yes, the transcendental strengthening that grants pure, simple physical strength is the true effect of the first divine protection.

"STOOOOOOOOOOOOOP!"

The bundles of chains wrapped around the Greed-Gore's tail let out high-pitched creaks. If I hadn't absorbed the iron sand of the greatsword, they might have lacked strength and snapped.

Hitsugi's hard work is paying off. Not a single chain breaks; they are holding strong against this incredibly heavy burden.

And then the Greed-Gore finally stops.

My feet stop gouging the earth and prevent me from being pulled forwards, stopping the Greed-Gore from taking another step.

The Greed-Gore attempts to push forwards to devour the prey right in front of its eyes, but my – the Demon King's – arms don't allow that to happen.

But I still have far more power than this, you know.

"PULL! HITSUGI!"

"EEEEEEI! YAAAAAAAHH!"

With an adorable yell, she begins winding the chains in forcefully.

The huge tail above my head that's swaying back and forth begins to sink downwards. It's as if it's become snagged on a crane's hook and is being forcefully pulled down.

As the pointed end of the tail is dragged down in front of me, I reach and grab onto it directly.

If I just prevent its movement, nothing will happen. The fastest way to put a stop to this guy is to defeat him with my own strength.

Now I'll show you the physical strength of a Demon King.

"UOOOOOOOOOH!"

Like an explosion, the crimson aura around my arms begins to rise up violently. My arms are so hot that it feels like my very bones are going to melt, but my strength keeps increasing limitlessly.

I grasp the tail as if I'm embracing it, and a crack forms on the surface of the carapace around the fingertips that are digging into it. At the same time, the ground I'm standing on begins to crumble.

My body is currently bearing the entire weight of the Greed-Gore.

I wonder if this guy is wondering how this is possible. I hear a loud, high-pitched cry that sounds like a scream.

And then I finally lift it up. The Greed-Gore's enormous body is in the air.

Holding the tip of the Greed-Gore's tail, I throw it behind me as if performing a shoulder throw*.

<TLN*: A judo move.>

I send the Greed-Gore flying. Even I can't believe that I've managed to pull off this unreal feat.

A mountain of stone passes over my head. Maybe it's more appropriate to call it an enormous meteorite. As I imagine the impact of it hitting the ground, I feel certain that that's a better way to describe it.

And then the moment of impact comes.

The deafening sound of an object of enormous mass striking the earth echoes out,

drowning out my war cry, the Greed-Gore's scream and the sound of the falling rain.

The force of my throw and the tremors running across the ground's surface knock me off my feet, and before I know what's happening, I'm on my back on the ground.

The sky above me is earth-colored. A huge amount of dirt rains down on me, as if trying to bury me alive.

"Buhah! Damn it, I've been getting covered in dirt all day today."

Pushing aside the layer of mud that's fallen on top of me, I stand up, full of vigor.

The Greed-Gore is lying on the ground motionlessly like a beached whale, but it's only temporarily unable to move from the shock of what just happened.

I'm not going to let my guard down until I finish it off – no, even after I finish it off. And now's my chance to do that.

The Demon King's strength is still running through my arms, but not for much longer. I'm sure that if the effect is released even for a moment, my arms will become motionless and I won't be able to lift even a single finger.

There's a price to pay for the power that I desired.

But this is enough for now. I'm not foolish enough to let this chance escape me.

"Come! [Wrath-Pun's Right Arm!] "

When I took that attack from the iron sand greatsword, this guy fell to the ground, but I've still got control over it with my Sword Arts. When I summon it, it quickly returns to my hand.

As I grip the handle of the red machete, the Greed-Gore lets out a howl.

Still lying on the ground, it twists its tail violently towards me to prevent me from closing in. It's like a castle wall has just begun moving on its own. This might be a vain struggle on its part, but if it hits me, I'm still going to die instantly.

I slip past the tail that's being thrown around like a whip and step on its base before approaching the Greed-Gore's torso.

I wonder if it feels an unpleasant sensation, like an insect crawling around on your skin. The Greed-Gore thrashes its body around violently, trying to shake me off as I run up the side of its body.

I won't do something pathetic like losing my footing and falling off. I step firmly on the red, brick-like carapace and leap up with all of my strength. I'm already within range.

The crimson blade of [Wrath-Pun's Right Arm] that I'm gripping with both hands is aimed at the neck.

Right now, the Greed-Gore's weakest point with the thinnest defense is where Nero's shining martial art cut about halfway through its carapace.

"Grenade –"

The black heat is compressed not in a projectile shell, but in [Wrath-Pun's Right Arm] itself.

I pour the red-hot energy of [Overdrive] that's raging inside my body into my weapon, almost enough to melt the blade off.

The crimson blade turns even redder, and the overflowing magical energy becomes an aura of rising flames. I don't care if it breaks from this attack.

"– HIGH BURST!"

My crimson weapon buries itself in the Greed-Gore's neck with the momentum of my entire body. With the power of the Demon King behind it, my blade – no, warhead – finds the gap in its broken carapace.

And then it releases the heat contained within. There is a huge explosion.

"UOOOOH!"

The flames surging out of my weapon fill my vision.

The fact I'm able to register a hot sensation rather than being burned alive is thanks to the [Nanablast Amulet.]

But even though that blocks the flames, the shock wave produced by the attack affects

more than just my target. My whole body is almost blown away by the resulting blast wave.

However, the heat and shockwave running into the Greed-Gore's neck is greater than the recoil that I'm experiencing.

My all-out, point-blank bombardment blows away the red-brown rock carapace completely.

The carapace has been smashed to smithereens. I can see black scorch-marks, and the faint smell of burning flesh stings my nose.

In payment for this explosion, the [Wrath-Pun's Right Arm] crumbles into pieces as well. Only the base of the vividly red blade remains.

But this was a worthy price to pay. With that, I'm finally able to finish this guy off.

"Pile –"

Right before my eyes is a large gash in the the carapace where it has been destroyed and the Greed-Gore's flesh has been exposed.

The muscles that move this abnormally huge creature are as strong as bundles of steel fibers, but not strong enough to withstand this next attack.

I will definitely pierce them with this attack.

My first, fastest black magic spell, [Pile Bunker] – no, with the Demon King's arms, it deserves a more suitable name.

"WRATH IMPACT!"

The burning red energy flows up my right arm.

It gathers at my fist as I twist it forwards in a screwing motion, adding a second source of destructive power to the attack.

I feel the dull sensation of striking flesh. At the same time, my right arm sinks into the Greed-Gore's body, piercing through it. In one movement, my arm is buried in flesh up to my shoulder.

Taking the Greed-Gore's size into account, I suppose being pierced by an object the length of a human arm is equivalent to a human being stabbed with a nail. Either way, it's still got to hurt. In response to that violent pain, the Greed-Gore lets out a shriek loud enough to burst my eardrums.

And at that very moment, the heat in my fist is released. The high-temperature explosion sears the Greed-Gore's muscles, scorches its nerves and boils its blood.

Letting out more screams of anguish, the Greed-Gore raises its head and writhes in pain.

As it howls at the sky, bloody vomit mixed with black smoke leaks from its mouth. It seems that the heat reached its throat, burning all the way into its respiratory tract.

But I'm not done yet. This isn't enough to bring death upon this enormous monster.

And so this is truly my final attack.

"Demon Eye Release."

My fist is still inside the Greed-Gore's neck. Using the shadow in my hand as an opening for my [Shadow Gate] , I summon the terrifying Demon Eyes that transform everything they see into purple crystal – the [Amethyst Gaze.]

Hitsugi skillfully used her tentacles to open the jar that contained the Demon Eyes and gently handed them to me.

The eyes themselves aren't hard like stones. Gently, so they aren't crushed, I let go of the eyeballs in my hands.

The moment they leave my fingertips, the Blackening is undone – I feel like I heard a voice whisper, "GIVE HER BACK."

And so I discard the Demon Eyes that shine with malice inside the Greed-Gore.

I quickly jump away and watch the Greed-Gore as it writhes and howls in agony, whispering words of pity.

"How's that... The Demon Eyes are pretty effective, aren't they?"

The interior of the Greed-Gore's neck is bathed in the crystallizing light continuously released by the Demon Eyes. It's being turned into amethyst from the inside out.

That purple light is soon visible through the surface of the Greed-Gore's body. It's only one small crack at first, but as I look on, the entire reddish-brown carapace is being consumed by the purple crystal before my eyes.

The incredibly hard rock carapace being transformed into brittle amethyst is a wondrous sight.

However, that transformation is reaching its end.

And the moment that the Greed-Gore raises its head as if to escape the pain of being crystallized, the transformed amethyst at its neck crumbles, unable to bear the weight of both its head and body.

With one final, forced scream, the Greed-Gore's head rolls onto the ground.

There's no blood. All that can be seen at the neck's cross-section is beautifully shining purple crystal.

"I finally... defeated it..."

With its head severed, the Greed-Gore is completely silent.

There are no cheers of victory from the fortress; the only sound echoing through the Iskia Hills is the sound of the continuously falling rain.

Even I don't have the strength left to raise my voice in happiness. The red-hot aura around my arms fades away, as if being extinguished by the rain. As it does so, I feel the strength leaving my arms, little by little.

"With this, I've cleared the second trial."

With the Greed-Gore's motionless corpse in front of me, in the moment I'm about to lose focus –

I hear something that sounds like the crackling of lightning.

"Wha-?!"

The Greed-Gore's mouth is half-open with its tongue hanging out loosely, and from within comes a single line of lightning.

It let out a Thunder Breath? No, that's not right?!

This is an ominous-looking mass of electricity in the shape of a Lamia. With its tail of purple lightning wriggling around behind it, it closes in on me in a straight line. What is this thing?!

By the time I perceive this, it's already got a hold of my face –

CHAPTER 343

THE THIRD TRIAL

“– AAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!”

I have a feeling that I’m screaming.

Pain? Agony? No, this is a much more terrible sensation.

Ah, that’s right. This is just like when the inside of my head was violated, dominated and messed around with.

Something is tampering with my brain right now.

I can’t see anything. I can’t hear anything. There’s only an uncomfortable, disgusting feeling.

Stop it, stop it. I’m me. Nobody else.

I desperately try to resist, but I can’t stop the [thing] that’s trying to get into my brain. It won’t... stop...

“Gah... ah, agh...”

Even trying to maintain my consciousness is incredibly painful.

Suddenly, something starts flickering in front of my eyes. It’s blinding – no, maybe my eyes have already been destroyed.

Now I hear something in my ears. A loud, grating sound, just meaningless noise. But my willpower is stolen from me, like I’m being heavily assaulted verbally.

Next is my nose. An irritating odor that feels like stabbing needles. And after that is my tongue. Finally, my whole body.

My five senses have been twisted. Sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch – the suffering inflicted on each of them harmonize perfectly to torture me.

It's enough to make me want to willingly hand my body over!

And as my consciousness leans towards a slow suicide... I feel like there's a light shining.

It's not the purple sparks that attack my vision; it's an incredibly gentle, soft, white light.

That white light gradually begins to take a clear shape. Yes, that's a single white wing –

“AAAGH!”

In an instant, my consciousness, my five senses, everything returns to normal. I feel like I've just woken up from a deep sleep.

It's still raining incessantly. I see the Greed-Gore's corpse. I feel the physical weariness that envelops my whole body, and the heaviness of my arms that feel like they've turned into lead.

I'm sure I only lost consciousness for a few seconds. The scenery before my eyes hasn't changed.

The only change is that the culprit of that mental attack is rolling around in front of me.

“I see... This guy is the [Sloth-Gil*] , huh.”

<TLN*: Previously (incorrectly) translated as Sloth-Sgil>

The creature writhing in pain on the swamp-like ground can only be described as a Lamia-shaped mass of electricity.

Its entire two-meter-long body is covered in purple lightning; the only features that I can barely make out are the depressions in its head that look like the eye sockets of a person's skull and a mouth.

I don't know if the sounds that sound like groans of pain are being made by this guy's vocal chords, or are just the sounds of the crackling lightning.

Its long tail of lightning is wriggling left and right, and its four-fingered, thin hands are desperately clawing at the earth. It's crawling and writhing in agony in an unsightly way.

This ominous-looking monster is the Sloth-Gil that bears the title of [Sloth.]

This is my first time seeing it, but I am immediately able to conclude this because the left eye that I received from Mia glowed red as a sign that this guy is one of the trial monsters.

Right around its back, it looks like there are red lines running down its body. That's probably the proof of extermination that I need to offer.

"The Guild's information isn't very reliable..."

When I did my research before, I read that the Sloth-Gil was likely to be a mutated version of a catfish-like monster called a [Maznacles.]

But in reality, it's a Lamia that doesn't bear the slightest resemblance to a catfish. There was no way that anyone could guess that it would possess dangerous abilities like being able to infest a Rank 5 monster or being able to create a monster army, using only the small amount of information provided by the Guild. The only thing that the Guild got right is that it's able to use powerful lightning-element abilities.

But I suppose since nobody even knows what kind of monster it is, let alone where it lives, that means it's a pretty rare monster. One could say that it was careless of me to believe all the information I read.

Whatever, I can regret my decisions later.

"I've cleared the third trial as well, thanks to Nell..."

This charm that Nell gave me, the [Aria Guard-Feather] , protected my mind.

It was originally given to me just in case I was ever at risk of being possessed by the cursed weapons when I participated in the [Curse Carnival] ; I hadn't expected that it would be of use here.

This charm isn't limited to just blocking the effects of curses; it removes Status Effects that affect the mind such as Charm and Confusion.

In other words, it also acts to counter parasites.

On the other hand, it has no response to attacks like [Amethyst Gaze] that affect my body directly. It didn't come in handy when I wanted it to, but in the end, it still saved my life.

I really don't know how I'm supposed to thank Nell.

The only regrettable thing is that all of the charm's power has been used up in forcing the Sloth-Gil back out of my head.

When I take out the feather that I had in the inside pocket of my coat, its faint glow has disappeared completely and its original white color has faded to gray.

As the wind blows, it crumbles away like ash, trickling through my fingers and vanishing into the air.

It shouldn't have been limited to a single use, but I suppose this is to be expected of a Rank 5 monster.

Most parasites would be obliterated after being repelled by the divine protection of the Heaven-Calming Imperial Princess Aria. The fact that the Sloth-Gil narrowly escaped with its life shows how much vitality a Rank 5 monster has.

However, as it's now on the verge of death, its survival means nothing.

My body is near its limits from the activation of [Overdrive] , but I still have enough strength left to finish off the pitiful Sloth-Gil squirming in the mud.

This guy doesn't even have scales or a hide, let alone a hard carapace like the Greed-Gore. It's obvious that creatures that specialize in parasitic abilities don't have strong bodies. This guy is probably something like a Wraith or Elemental; a half-physical, half-magical creature. Those kinds of enemies are usually fragile.

But I don't feel comfortable about directly hitting this mass of electricity. I don't even know if I can give it a proper punch with my current strength.

Then I have only one weapon I can choose to use here.

I produce the twin-barreled prototype rifle from my shadow. I'm going to pay you back

for the Morjura attack on Simon with this weapon that he created.

The gun in my hands feels a hundred times heavier than usual. As I take my aim, the muzzles quiver.

But I won't miss at this distance. My bullet will definitely pierce your head.

"... Bullet Arts."

The end of the third trial is marked by the sound of a gunshot.

CHAPTER 344

REUNION (1)

The monster army has been annihilated, the Greed-Gore is defeated and the Sloth-Gil that was controlling all of them is dead. The danger has finally passed.

“Oh, it’s stopped raining.”

It was pouring down so heavily, but now that the battle is over, it’s mysteriously stopped.

Rays of sunlight begin to pierce the thick, dark clouds and shine brightly on the hills of Iskia.

But my clothes that were exposed to that torrential downpour aren’t going to dry all of a sudden.

“I want to get back quickly and take a nice, hot bath...”

Whispering this earnest wish of mine, I stand alone on the walls of Iskia Fortress, looking down over the hills.

Right after I killed the Sloth-Gil, the students realized that the battle was finally over and gave a loud cheer of victory. But they won’t be celebrating forever.

Now that there are no more enemies, there’s no reason to stay at this fortress. Everyone is fatigued from defending the fortress for days on end. There’s no doubt that they want to get back and rest even more desperately than I do.

“Listen up! We’re definitely taking this Greed-Gore’s body with us back to Spada!”

“It’s impossible for us to carry this massive thing with us! I’m telling you, we should leave it to the Knights’ Order or the Guild!”

Will is the only one who still has an incredible amount of energy.

He’s clambering over the Greed-Gore’s corpse and desperately trying to convince the

students to take it back with them.

The one reprimanding him for making such a ridiculous request is... oh, isn't that Eddy? Next to him is his childhood friend Shenna, wearing an exasperated expression. It's good to see that they're doing well.

Ah, I really managed to save everyone this time – I truly begin to feel that.

"I cannot allow that! We must make a triumphant return with this beast and write another page in the new legend of the Nightmare Berserker!"

Will's nonchalant words dampen my happy mood. I suppose I should tell him later that my real class is Black Magic User.

Giving a small sigh, I watch from on top of the fortress walls as the students make their preparations to go home.

I did offer my help, but as I'm tired from defeating the two bosses, I was politely refused and told to rest. I'm sure that it's not like they're scared of me and don't want me coming near them.

And so I'm the only one who's allowed to stand here and give my body the rest that it needs.

The Dragon carriages have already been prepared outside the fortress gates and the students are busily running back and forth, putting their luggage inside. It seems difficult for them because their bodies are tired, but there are bright smiles on their faces.

The fact that they won this battle is giving them more strength than anything else.

"– Kurono-kun."

I suddenly hear a gentle voice calling my name.

Lifting my head up, I see a beautiful princess standing there, her long black hair fluttering in the soft breeze.

"Nell, have you finished treating everyone?"

Seeing her nod with a smile, I can tell that all of the injured are now safe.

There were already monsters inside the fortress by the time I arrived, so I'm sure that there were a lot of students injured in close-quarters battle.

Like me, Nell is also quite fatigued from battle. But even so, it's times like these when a Priest's abilities are needed the most.

But even if her magical power was reaching its limits, she wouldn't hesitate to keep casting healing magic on the injured.

"Your older brother, err, Nero, is he alright?"

"Eh? Yes, only his legs and arms were paralyzed a little."

Was it so unexpected for me to ask about Nero? Nell was a little surprised, or more like, her reaction was as if she didn't know who I was talking about at first.

I suppose it's not that surprising; Nero and I aren't really acquainted and the one point of contact that we did have was under the worst possible circumstances. To him, I remain the villainous Tentacle Man.

Still, even though it's just a slight paralysis, I'd thought that Nell would be more distressed that her beloved, respected older brother is injured... Well, they're in the same party; I'm sure she's used to Nero being injured. Considering all of this, there's no doubt that she has absolute trust in her brother.

"I'm glad it wasn't anything serious. If Prince Nero didn't arrive right when he did, I would have died."

I think it was really lucky. He didn't offer me kind words or healing magic like Nell would, but his appearance there is enough to deserve my thanks.

"Sorry Nell, getting defeated once like that worried you, huh. But I didn't expect that you'd fly down to save me."

Nero cornered the Greed-Gore to the point of defeat, but Nell flying down allowed the Greed-Gore to turn the tables on him.

Because I collapsed in that situation, I'm the reason Nell took that kind of action, but

I'm sure even she is looking back on her actions as rash and careless.

"I'm sorry."

Nell is wearing an expression of sorrow, as if tears will spill from her big blue eyes at any moment, so I can't reprimand her any further. If I make Nell cry here, I get the feeling that I'll really get killed by Nero this time.

"But I... no matter what, I wanted to help you, Kurono-kun..."

"Thanks. But putting your older brother in danger is –"

"I don't care about Onii-sama!"

I'm surprised to hear Nell raise her voice. But what surprises me even more is the way she approaches me quickly, as if she's going to throw herself into my arms.

Her faint, flower-like fragrance reaches me.

"I don't care about Onii-sama... I wanted to save you, Kurono-kun."

Her upturned eyes are moist, as if begging me for something. The upwards gaze of her blue eyes pierces straight through me.

I'm shocked by her earnestness and beauty; it's just like when I was alone with her in the infirmary after my battle with Saeed.

Doing my best not to have weird thoughts, I somehow manage to form words into a response.

"Do you really not trust me that much?"

"Kurono-kun, you always push yourself too hard. In that fighting tournament, and again in this battle... I'm always worried..."

"... Sorry."

I'm really fed up with how pathetic I am.

I have an absolute goal that I can't give up on, the goal of overcoming the trials and

defeating the Apostles. But that task is so dangerous that there is someone who worries about me to the point that she loses control of herself.

That's why I need more strength. I need to be strong like Nell's older brother, so that she can watch over me without worrying.

"No, it's fine. You have a reason you need to become stronger, don't you, Kurono-kun? I won't do anything to stop you."

Nell isn't touching me. It looks like my feelings are being leaked even without telepathy.

Now that I think about it, it hasn't been long since I became good friends with her, but I feel like she's already learned a lot about me.

I wonder if I understand Nell as well as she understands me.

"That's why I will help you from now on as well, Kurono-kun."

That's exactly why I feel uneasy. I'm afraid that I'm always dependent on Nell regardless of what I do.

"I will heal whatever injuries you sustain. I fully blocked the Breath in this battle, and I'm going to improve myself in order to keep providing you support with more strengthening spells."

But even so, Nell says that she will help me as if it's the obvious thing for her to do. Not because it's her duty or obligation to do so, but because she believes that it is what she should do from the bottom of her heart.

"That's why, Kurono-kun, you should make me –"

At this moment, a gust of wind blows across the top of the fortress walls.

The wind is stronger than I expected, and both my and Nell's black hair flutter in the wind. It easily blows the hair around our faces.

Nell's words were interrupted in a weird spot, and I kind of feel like there's this atmosphere where I can't really tell her to continue. I instinctively shift my gaze away over the fortress walls.

“... Hmm?”

I see shadows beyond the green hills, heading this way. There are three silhouettes of people on horseback.

“Hey Nell, are those –”

I’m about to ask her if the Knights’ Order or adventurers have arrived, but I hold back the ending to my question.

“Ah, those are the members of Wing Road and... err, one more person that I don’t know.”

With my sharp eyes, I can see the girl with red twin-tails that I stopped with my tentacles in the dining hall, Charlotte – Will’s younger sister and Third Princess of Spada.

She’s riding on the same eight-legged horse as a bespectacled girl with purple hair. The girl with the glasses is holding the reins, and I assume that she’s the daughter of the Hydra house, Safiel.

Next to them is a young man with blonde hair and a greatsword on his back, riding on a Bicorn. He’s the swordsman named Kai, huh.

It’s my first time seeing the two of them, but their appearance is just as the rumors say, and Nell herself is saying that they’re her party members so there’s no mistaking who they are.

“No, that’s not one more person... it’s two more people.”

“Ah, now that I look more closely, there is one more, a small child... Eh, are those... wings?”

There is a young woman and a little girl riding on a magnificent, large black horse. If there’s anyone who wouldn’t fail to recognize who they are, it’s me.

“Yeah, those are Fairy wings. Nell, I’ll introduce them to you later; they’re members of my party, [Element Masters.] ”

“... Eh?”

Nell opens her eyes wide; she looks incredibly surprised. I suppose it is really unexpected for my party members to turn up with this timing together with the Wing Road members.

But rather than trying to guess and explain the situation, quickly, ah, I really want to see Lily and Fiona.

“Well then, Nell, I’m going to go ahead and meet up with those two.”

“Eh, ah, Kurono-kun?! Wait, Kurono-kun!”

As I leap off the fortress walls, Nell’s surprised voice reaches my ears. Sorry for surprising you so much, but I have Hitsugi, so I’m fine jumping off high places!

Deciding to leave that explanation for later, I run as fast as I can to reunite with my party members.

CHAPTER 345

REUNION (2)

In front of Iskia Fortress's main gate, the adventurer party [Element Masters] meet again for the first time in about three weeks.

"Lily! Fiona –"

"Kurono!"

Lily uses her two shining wings to leap off the running horse and fly into Kurono's chest.

Kurono is surprised by her unexpected behavior and the speed of her movement, but catches her small body in his arms.

"– Careful, Lily! I missed you!"

"Yeah! Lily missed you too, Kurono!"

"Uooh! Lily!"

"Kuronooo!"

With their arms around each other, they roll on the ground, rubbing their cheeks together.

They look like silly love birds – no, a silly parent and child reuniting, but it seems that Kurono and Lily find this to be an appropriate way to express their happiness at being reunited.

Lily is incredibly adorable with a smile that covers her whole face, but Kurono looks incredibly evil with the same smile on his face. Just like a demon who has captured a child to use as a sacrifice.

"Kurono-san, I missed you too, you know."

Glaring at the pair with reproachful eyes and a completely exasperated look on her face, Fiona gets a firm hold on the sleeve of [Diablo's Embrace] and steals the joyful Kurono's attention.

Just outside of Kurono's peripheral vision, Lily pouts a little.

"Yeah, I missed you too, Fiona. Welcome back."

"Yes, I am back, Kurono-san."

As Kurono makes no attempt to hide how happy he is to see her in his eyes or in his words, the smallest of smiles appears on Fiona's expressionless, sleepy-looking face.

But the unusual thing is not her smile, but her next act.

Still holding onto his sleeve, Fiona brings her body closer to Kurono's, as if attracted to him. It is as if she is jealous of Lily, who has her arms tightly wrapped around his neck.

It takes only a moment for her body to reach his. The witch's robe and devil's coat brush against each other.

Though these two pieces of clothing possess powerful defensive capabilities and elemental resistances, it seems that they can indeed feel each other's body heat. Kurono makes a complicated expression, a mixture of surprise and embarrassment. Fiona's white cheeks are hidden behind the wide brim of her trademark three-cornered hat so that nobody can see them, but they have definitely turned red.

"Muuh! Fiona, you're not allowed to do that!"

"Isn't it fine, Lily-san? I want to be spoiled from time to time as well."

Lily thrashes her wings about as if denying Fiona's words, but Fiona presses herself more firmly against Kurono's body as if to say that she'll never let go.

"Well then, I've been lonely, so can I have the two of you spoil me as well?"

Watching their playful fight from up close, Kurono simply hugs both of them.

Lily is holding onto his bare right arm, where his sleeve has been destroyed, with the

entirety of her small body. Meanwhile, Fiona is embracing his left arm with her slender shoulder pressed up against it.

Kurono himself is half-joking as he hugs them both. But he's also half-serious.

The two people clinging onto his arms make him happier than anything else; they are the ones he trusts the most, the ones who put his mind at ease.

It is only when one spends some time apart from friends that he is truly grateful to have them. This is a small lesson, but one that touches Kurono's heart.

"Mhmm, I can, Kurono. Lily will spoil you lots!"

"Yes, I will spoil you plenty, Kurono-san."

Such an unimaginably sweet* response. Kurono turns red at these words that are so sweet that he feels as if he is drinking maple syrup from the bottle. He feels relief from the bottom of his heart that the two of them are embracing him in a way that they can't see his expression of embarrassment.

<TLN*: 甘い/amai which means "sweet" uses the same kanji as 甘える/amaeru, the verb meaning "to spoil". It's... kind of a pun, but not really and I can't explain it much better than this.>

"Th-thanks, Lily, Fiona."

But he ends up stuttering in a high-pitched voice, so his lack of composure is obvious anyway.

"Mufufufuu! Kurono, chuu~!*"

"Fufu, Kurono-san, gyuu~*"

<TLN*: Chuu and gyuu are onomatopoeic sounds for a kiss and a hug respectively.>

Experiencing the sensation of a childish pair of lips pressing against his cheek and the warmth of a soft body wrapped around his chest only makes Kurono turn redder.

But he regrets nothing.

“Ah, you two are really the number one for me.”



“Yeah, those are Fairy wings. Nell, I’ll introduce them to you later; they’re members of my party, [Element Masters.] ”

I let out a foolish-sounding “Eh?”

But I cannot help responding this way, because I really cannot understand what Kurono-kun is saying.

Say, Kurono-kun, why are your party members females? Why does your face look so happy?

It’s strange, this is really strange. After all, Kurono-kun’s party members are the kind of people who selfishly act on their own, aren’t they?

Doing something horrible like leaving this worrisome Kurono-kun on his own is something I could never do. The fact that they are not with him is proof that the level of trust between them is low.

But even so, why, just why is Kurono-kun laughing like that? This is my first time seeing such a happy expression on Kurono-kun’s face.

I don’t understand, I don’t understand what is in Kurono-kun’s heart. Ah, I have a really, *really* terrible feeling about this...

“Well then, Nell, I’m going to go ahead and meet up with those two.”

Kurono-kun throws himself off the fortress walls, as if he cannot wait any longer. I immediately reach out, but my hand grasps the empty air in vain.

“Eh, ah, Kurono-kun?! Wait, Kurono-kun!”

Don’t go, please don’t go. Please don’t disappear from my sight – these feelings of anxiety suddenly stir within me.

But all I can do is call his name. My voice, my feelings, they do not reach him.

Kurono-kun uses those black tentacles that could even bind the Greed-Gore to safely land at the bottom of the fortress walls, and then runs along the top of the hill. Towards his cold-hearted party members.

“Y-you can’t... Kurono-kun...”

Even though my chest is burning with the urge to stop him, my body does not move, as if it has been frozen in ice. I can only watch from atop these walls as the distance between Kurono and those two gets smaller and smaller.

From far away, I could make out two silhouettes, one with wings of light and one with a black three-cornered hat. But now, I can see that they are an adorable Fairy and a beautiful witch.

Are those two really Kurono-kun’s party members? No, they aren’t, they are not. The only one who really knows Kurono-kun and can help him is me.

After all, Kurono-kun is always misunderstood, ostracized, hated – but I, only I can understand him.

I have not known Kurono-kun for long, but even so, I know a lot about him.

“Thank you. Because of you, Nell-san, I have gotten the hang of casting spells.”

Kurono-kun was so happy the first time he was able to cast [Force Boost.] If he is happy, I am happy as well.

“This sandwich is delicious.”

Kurono-kun said this earnestly, thinking of me as he spoke. Fufu, it is alright, because I will make him more delicious food from now on.

“I think of you as a normal friend, Nell-san.”

Kurono-kun called me his friend, as if he was stating the obvious. At that time, I thought about how I was able to make a friend on my own for the first time, and I was so happy that I almost cried.

“Thanks, Nell, I’ll be counting on you when the time comes.”

Kurono-kun believed in me as a Healer. I'm sorry; at that time I was so happy that you put your trust in me that I flew up into the air by myself, didn't I?

"Sorry about this Nell, I hurt myself pretty badly..."

Sorry, I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. The reason you sustained such a horrific injury is because I was late to the match. From now on, I will make Kurono-kun my number one priority. Even if I have to sacrifice someone else in the process.

If I don't do that, I can't help Kurono-kun as he faces danger. I cannot stop him.

"There are some guys that I need to kill, no matter what."

I already found out about that.

"I couldn't protect this village, I couldn't protect my friends..."

"Shit! Damn it! Was I not able to protect anyone this time, either...?"

"I see, it's my fault... that everyone is dead."

I have already found out about the weight that Kurono-kun is shouldering.

I want to help him, I want to become his strength, I want to be of use to him. I want to heal that sadness, that pain.

No matter what difficulties Kurono-kun faces from now on, I will, I will –

"I-I will protect you, Kurono-kun... I will do my best. I will do anything, everything for you, Kurono-kun. So... It's fine, isn't it? Please make me your only partner –"

"– Careful, Lily! I missed you!"

Kurono-kun embraces the Fairy girl.

His face shows that he is truly happy from the bottom of his heart. He catches her small body mid-air against his broad, sturdy chest and wraps his strong arms around her as if he will never let her go.

"Yeah! Lily missed you too, Kurono!"

The Fairy called Lily, about the size of a human toddler, is clinging onto Kurono's neck. Like a kitten being spoiled by its owner.

"Uooh! Lily!"

"Kuronooo!"

Kurono-kun's excited voice reaches my ears.

I have only just noticed that I unconsciously started using a wind-element spell that gathers sound in order to eavesdrop.

If I stop this spell, I will not have to hear any more. I will not have to hear Kurono-kun and that child's joyful voices.

If I close my eyes, I will not have to see any more. I will not have to see Kurono embracing that child.

"Ah, aah... Stop... Please... stop..."

But I cannot do that. I cannot cover my ears or avert my eyes. After all, if I do that, Kurono-kun will be even more –

"Yeah, I missed you too, Fiona. Welcome back."

"Yes, I am back, Kurono-san."

This time, the witch is next to Kurono-kun. Ah, you can't, please stop, don't get so close to Kurono-kun –

"STOP!"

As if it is only natural, the witch presses her body against Kurono-kun's.

If it were only the small Fairy girl, then it would still be acceptable. But the witch is about the same age as me, and when she gets close to Kurono-kun, they look just like... l-lovers, don't they...?

She can't, she definitely can't do that. I'm sure that Kurono-kun actually dislikes –

“Well then, I’ve been lonely, so can I have the two of you spoil me as well?”

I hear words so sweet that they could dissolve in water. I see an embrace so hot that his arms might melt.

“That is a... lie, isn’t it, Kurono-kun?”

Kurono is accepting these girls himself. I cannot believe this. I do not want to believe this.

“Mhmm, I can, Kurono. Lily will spoil you lots!”

“Yes, I will spoil you plenty, Kurono-san.”

I don’t want to see anything more, I don’t want to hear anything more.

“Th-thanks, Lily, Fiona.”

I don’t want to witness Kurono-kun having his heart stolen by other girls anymore –

“... Eh?”

Unable to bear it anymore, I try to look away. But before I can do so, I get the feeling that our eyes have met.

Kurono-kun is standing with his back facing the fortress, and the witch is being embraced against his chest. So only the Fairy girl clinging to his neck is facing in this direction.

It is a coincidence, I just happened to enter her field of vision – no, that shining emerald-colored gaze is definitely in my direction as I stand here on the fortress walls.

And then she smiles.

That is not the innocent smile of a young girl. It is nothing more than a twisted sneer.

That girl is definitely smiling at me with scorn.

Kurono-kun can’t see it; I am the only one she is showing this evil expression to.

And then she, no, that girl* shows off even more.

<TLN*: This is possibly a sign of disrespect from Nell, or maybe reluctance to use the word “彼女/kanojo” meaning “she” because it can also mean “girlfriend”>

“Mufufufuu! Kurono, chuu~!”

She delivers a kiss on Kurono’s cheek. I don’t need telepathy to understand the meaning behind it.

Kurono is mine – that is what she is telling me.

“N-no... That can’t... be... After all, I-I am... Kurono-kun’s number one –”

“Ah, you two are really the number one for me.”

These words finally force me to understand.

“... Kurono-kun, you love these two more than me, don’t you?”

Ah, I see, that is how it is.

From the very beginning, since the day we met, he already belonged to this Fairy and witch.

Huh? Then what am I, who wants to become Kurono’s number one, who wants to become his partner, supposed to do?

“K-Kurono-kun... I-I, I... Ah, uu, u, WAAAAAH –”

I cry. I find it hard to breathe. It hurts.

Vomit comes out of my mouth and splatters across the dirty stone floor. This sight only stimulates my nausea further, causing me to throw up even more.

Twice, three times, I stop breathing. My vomit scatters everywhere. My priest robe is dirtied; I am dirtied. My tears won’t stop. It hurts so much that I might die.

“Uu... waaaaah...”

But my heart is suffering the most. It's unbearable, it's painful, to the point that it feels like it will crumble to pieces at any moment.

My tears are overflowing and saliva is smeared around my mouth. My knees have lost their strength, leaving me squatting in this passageway. I cannot see Kurono-kun anymore. I cannot bear seeing Kurono-kun embracing other women any more.

But even as I close my eyes, Kurono-kun is holding those two in his arms right now –

“Kuh, uu... Don't take... Kurono-kun away... Don't take my Kurono-kun away...”

Say, Kurono-kun, is there a place for me by your side?

CHAPTER 346

THE REBELLION OF DAIDALOS

“... How noisy.”

This is the first thing Judas whispers to himself as he wakes up.

The ancient magic of the Media Ruin, a Rank 4 dungeon on the outskirts of Daidalos’s capital district, was used to establish the Fourth Research Laboratory. Bishop Judas, the founder of the [White Sacrament] , has been busy ever since.

Since the Month of First Flame (Hatsubi), the month in which he first stepped foot into this enormous Geofront, he hasn’t seen the light of the sun even once. That applies for the white-masked researchers employed here as well, but they haven’t been working as tirelessly as Judas has.

There is a single bed installed in this room in the deepest part of the laboratory complex, which simultaneously serves as a research room, office and personal room. Judas only uses it once a month. But today, his sleep lasted less than an hour before it was interrupted.

Just as Judas himself whispered, it is noisy outside.

The only sound inside the room is that of Judas throwing aside the bedsheets to rise from the bed.

A dim magical light on the ceiling is lit, illuminating the disorganized interior of the room and a muscular body that one would never imagine belonging to this old man. His stark-naked body is just like an ancient statue of a hero. Any man would yearn for such a strong body. Not only its muscles, but also the size of its manhood.

Judas’s bare body is seen by no-one. As he reaches out with an uncoordinated-looking movement, putting his hand on the bishop’s robe next to him that has been folded in a slightly crooked way –

The thick metal double-doors that cover the only entrance to the room open with a heavy creak.

The one who enters is one of the researchers wearing a white mask and cloak that Judas is so accustomed to seeing in this place.

“B-Bishop-sama... Please, run a...”

Not managing to finish his words, the male researcher collapses.

A pool of blood spreads across the floor. There is a large red stain on the back of the face-down researcher’s white cloak. It is clear that a sword has stabbed him from behind.

“Hmph, I don’t need you to lead the way anymore.”

No, there is no need to confirm the corpse’s condition after witnessing the murder first-hand.

“Oi, old man, you’re the boss of this place, right?”

Speaking in a deep, threatening voice, an Orc wearing a black helmet and suit of armor steps over the researcher’s corpse to enter the room. In his hand is a longsword stained with the researcher’s blood.

Judas’s body is large for a human’s, but it definitely looks small compared to the enormous Orc who stands at a towering height of over two meters.

The Orc is not the only intruder. Behind him is a group of knights wearing similar black armor, all of large races such as Lizardmen and Cyclopes.

Knights. They are not just any enemies, but genuine knights appointed by the king himself.

“Remnants of the Daidalos army... I was in the middle of my rest; would you please come again tomorrow?”

Judas lets out a huge yawn as he scratched his head that is covered in white, shoulder-length hair. As these knights barged in before he managed to put on his bishop’s robe, he is still naked. He is incredibly defenseless.

“Don’t go senile on me, old man.”

There is no way that Bishop Judas, the man who has accomplished the incredible feat of artificially creating the seventh Apostle, has gone senile.

Judas has only just awakened from slumber, but he understands the situation better than anyone else at the Fourth Research Laboratory.

Rebellions have been occurring frequently as of late, all over the country. With Sariel in command, the Crusaders have been running around to suppress them, but it has been largely unsuccessful.

While that was happening, there were rumors that the remnants of Daidalos's army were gathering troops once more and planning to recapture the capital district. Small-scale rebellions occurring all over the country caused the Crusaders' forces to be divided. In other words, they were a diversion. Even if one guessed that this was the case, the rebellions needed to be dealt with quickly. As a result, the Crusaders were forced to dispatch troops everywhere.

But even though these rumors were unconfirmed, the defenses in Daidalos's capital district weren't critically lacking. Additional reinforcements had even been dispatched from the Sinclair Republic. There were no gaps in Crusader troops' positions. Even though the Daidalos army couldn't move openly, they would have surely been aware of this, at least.

So then what move would the Daidalos army make? Would they decide that the enemy forces had been divided sufficiently by their diversionary tactics and move in on the capital district? It seemed that those at the Crusaders headquarters were making various predictions and forming plans to counter the Daidalos army's movements, but Judas arrived at the correct answer a long time ago.

"Your objective is those Black Dragons, is it not? It makes no difference whether you come today or tomorrow. Those things have already been fully trained."

"Y-you shitty old man! What have you done to his highness the prince?!"

The Dragon King Garvinal has been slain by Sariel. There are none other than his sons who can succeed him. The blood of the royal family is absolutely crucial for the nation of Daidalos's revival.

Garvinal had left a considerable number of children, but right after Daidalos was seized, they were all brought to the Fourth Research Laboratory to be used as

experimental subjects. Normally, at least one of them would have been moved to headquarters to be used for political purposes, but every single one of the Black Dragons have become materials for Judas's experiments.

The Crusaders' main army that took the capital district is fifteen thousand strong, and Cardinal Ars holds command over them. He owes a debt to Judas. If Judas asks something of him, he can never refuse. Of course, Sariel, who is the supreme commander of the Crusaders, cannot refuse any of Judas's requests either.

In any case, all of Garvinal's orphaned children have been gathered here at the Fourth Research Laboratory. That is why the Daidalos army has attacked this place.

Rescuing the royal family. That is their true objective.

They divided the Crusaders' troops all over the nation, and confined the remaining troops in Daidalos's capital district. All for the purpose of diverting attention away from this Rank 4 dungeon on the outskirts.

And now they have stepped foot into the deepest parts of this research laboratory. Both adventurers and knights have become familiar with the Media Ruin over many years as it is the closest dungeon to the capital district. As they were familiar with its layout, they would easily gain control over the whole dungeon if they were to use the secret passageways and hidden doors that have yet to be discovered by the researchers. In fact, these surprise tactics partially worked.

However, Judas whispers as if sneering at them.

"His highness the prince... Ah, Garvinal's eldest son, Black Dragon number 13. Give up on that one; it is currently flying somewhere over Pandora with a hero on its back."

The royal family member that they are supposed to serve, the first prince of Daidalos who was to become the next generation's Dragon King, is being used as a mount by a human – how humiliating this must be for these knights. Judas does not understand – no, he does not even think about it, but he does understand that this Orc Knight has lost himself in anger.

"I WON'T FORGIVE YOU! I'LL CUT YOU DOWN RIGHT HEEEEEEERE!"

Raising his bloodstained longsword, the Orc steps forward at a speed too quick to be seen by the eye.

Judas simply stares at his killer's blade with an unchanging sour look on his face – or so it appears.

“First technique – Flow.”

<TLN: This is the same technique that Nero used on Gustav in chapter 299.>

The entire room shakes with a thunderous sound.

It takes some time for the Daidalos knights behind the Orc to comprehend what happens next.

The ceiling collapses. The floor caves in. The Orc's magnificent black Daidalos-style armor is pulverized and his whole body collapses, covered in blood.

From one moment to the next, the situation has changed to this. They cannot understand what has happened.

“Hmm, my strength has grown quite dull. I thought that I would at least be able to break through the ceiling.”

The naked old man is still standing there, whispering these words of uncertain meaning.

The one who attacked him was a strong Orc knight, one of the elite. He was not simply a skilled swordsman; in the instant he attacked, he was using a deadly martial arts skill.

But he was unable to land even a scratch on this unarmed old man, this mere human, and now his body has plunged into the ground – the knights cannot understand, but they soon begin to recall what they just witnessed in that split second.

[First technique – Flow.] Judas used the Ancient Jujutsu by this name.

The Orc swung his blade downwards to split his target's head in half. He used the master-level martial arts skill, [Break Impact.] The tip of Judas's finger merely pressed lightly against tip of the sword from the side.

Touching a blade mid-swing is an unbelievably risky move, but the result of that move is even more unbelievable.

Just what kind of flow of power was at work here? At that moment, the Orc fell against the floor, as if choosing to kneel of his own accord.

His body fell with even more force than his original attack. No, it's not that simple. His body was thrust into the floor with incredible speed, as if an invisible giant's hand crushed him from above.

That was the first impact. The stone floor was pulverized by the Orc's enormous body crashing into it, and countless cracks appeared in his armor of black steel.

The excess kinetic energy from the impact brought the already unconscious Orc upwards. It would be more appropriate to say that he was sent flying. He bounced violently into the stone ceiling that is just as solid and hard as the floor.

That was the second impact. The ceiling caved in. Indeed, with a little more force, the Orc's face that resembles that of an evil demon would have broken through the ceiling and reached the floor above.

The third impact was the gentlest, with only the force of the Orc's fall from the ceiling. For the Orc who had already suffered fatal damage from his collision with the ceiling, the force of this impact was meaningless, however.

As he landed for the final time with a dull sound, his armor fell to pieces like broken porcelain. In the next moment, blood and cerebrospinal fluid spilled out of the helmet whose horn ornament was crushed flat.

"This guy is ridiculously strong! Taking him alive is impossible, we have to kill him here!"

The knights have finally processed what has happened. The Lizardman who appears to be the second-in-command after the Orc gives these orders in a spirited shout.

Though the chamber is quite spacious, there is not enough room to wield a spear or halberd. The Daidalos knights choose to use more maneuverable weapons like swords and knives, though they are less suitable for their large bodies, and slowly close the distance between themselves and Judas.

"Wait, Vice-captain, there's a hostage right here. Isn't it alright if we don't fight this dangerous-looking old man?"

The light-toned voice that seems to break the air of tension filling the room comes from among the Daidalos knights – no, from behind Judas, from on top of the bed that he just got out of.

Judas calmly turns around to look at this new person who has suddenly appeared, as well as the aforementioned [hostage.]

“Hyi, ah... Judas-sama...”

A single girl calls Judas’s name, sounding as if her voice is being squeezed out of her.

She is neither a beauty nor unattractive; her face is incredibly plain and inconspicuous.

Her thin body is also lacking in the sex appeal that a young girl should have. Her skin is white, but it is pale to the point of looking unhealthy.

Judas’s dark blue eyes look at the crying, trembling, naked girl whose youth is her only redeeming feature.

“Bringing a girl into a cave like this. You’re quite a popular old man.”

Indeed, this girl hasn’t suddenly appeared out of nowhere. She was sleeping in the same bed as Judas to begin with.

Up until now, she has been holding her breath and waiting for the danger to pass – no, it was likely that she suppressed her fear and stayed hidden by wrapping the bedsheets around herself in order to avoid getting in Judas’s way.

“A Slime Assassin? I see, such things exist.”

A blue, semi-transparent person thrusts a knife towards the plain-faced girl who is sobbing with fear of the danger that she is in. To be more precise, only the top half of this person’s body is actually person-shaped. Presumably, he needed a head with which to speak and arms with which to hold onto the girl. The lower half of his body is the same globular shape as a Slime monster, bobbing up and down on top of the bed. Of course, there is a shining red core at the center of his body.

The room is arranged in such a way that there is a ventilation duct right next to the bed. It is certain that the Slime Assassin used its flexible body to navigate freely

through the narrow ducts and entered the room from there. With this method of entry, he was only able to bring with him a single knife, however. And this knife is now being pressed against the back of the girl's thin neck.

"Hey, if you don't want your woman to be killed, surrender quietly. Careful now, there's no time to think. I'm only going to wait ten seconds. Here we go, ten! Nine –"

"Uu, uu... I'm sorry, I'm sorry, Judas-sama, for being so useless..."

As if repenting for the final time before she dies, the plain-faced girl repeatedly apologizes to Judas with tears flowing from her eyes like a waterfall.

Even so, the Slime man's heartless countdown does not stop. His tone sounded like he was joking, but he is dead serious. He is unlikely to care whether Judas surrenders or not.

The power that Judas demonstrated when he instantly killed the Orc knight is worthy of admiration, but if they were to attack him with this many elite knights while being careful not to drop their guard, they would suffer some losses but be able to take him down.

Judas knows that this is probably what the Slime is thinking, and is partially exasperated by his foolishness. Even unintelligent monsters can use their instincts to perceive when an enemy is stronger than them.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry that I'm such a useless woman, I'm sorry I'm ugly, I'm sorry my body is unattractive –"

"Dorothy, hurry and put your clothes on."

Judas gives another exasperated look, this time towards the girl, as he speaks.

"I'm sorr – eh?"

As Judas calls her name and calmly tells her to get changed as if nothing is out of the ordinary, Dorothy stares at him in puzzlement through teary eyes.

"Three, two, oi! What kind of stupid stuff are you saying, you shitty old man –"

"No, I suppose a shower comes first. Make sure you wash all of that Slime's mucus off

your body.”

Saying only these words, Judas turns his head to face the Daidalos knights standing at the room’s entrance once more.

Before Dorothy processes the meaning of Judas’s words, she sees it. The red crystal-like orb clutched in his right hand.

“Kah, haah! H-how...”

As this small voice fades away, the knife that has been pressed against Dorothy’s neck drops silently onto the bed’s surface.

“Eh, huh, eh?!”

Before she realizes what has happened, Dorothy lets out a shocked voice; she is covered in the mucus of the Slime that has melted away.

The fearsome Slime Assassin is no more. All that remains of him is the mucus that covers Dorothy’s naked body and the bedsheets.

“Y-you bastard! What did you just do?!”

Seeing the Slime Assassin suddenly die a mysterious death, the Lizardman vice-captain raises his voice.

“You do not know? Slimes’ cores are their weak point; if their cores are destroyed, they perish instantly.”

With the tone of an instructor at a knight’s school teaching something to a bad student, Judas tosses the Slime core to the floor. The impact causes the core to shatter to pieces like glass.

“That’s impossible, when, how did you...”

“Just now, I simply pulled it out. Is it possible that you could not see it?”

There is no way that the knights could have seen it. There is nothing to suggest that Judas has even taken a step; as far as they are aware, he has been standing in the exact same spot without moving.

Perhaps if Judas had used the legendary, time-stopping space-time spell known as Eternal, they would have reacted the same way.

Of course, Judas has already confirmed that a spell with such a legendary effect never existed even in ancient times, so he knows that this is an absurd comparison.

“Look, Dorothy. Our long-awaited experimental materials have come to us. We will be busy from now on.”

With his strong, muscular back facing Dorothy, Judas takes a step towards the Daidalos knights.

“Kuh, this man is dangerous! We have to bring him down here at all costs!”

The Daidalos knights have finally gotten serious, and they attack simultaneously.

Their battle formation is poor, but they possess formidable individual strength and the ability to work together in small numbers. They make full use of their numbers to deliver slashing and stabbing attacks from multiple directions. In response, Judas murmurs to himself.

“Oh dear. It seems that my sleepless nights will continue for some time.”

As a mere researcher, Dorothy cannot comprehend what happens next. All she can see is the gruesome corpses of the knights whose chests have been gouged out through their black steel armor. And in the center, there is the naked body of Judas, who has not been touched by a single drop of blood other than the red-stained right hand that plucked out their hearts.

The only thing she is sure of is that the battle is over. She didn’t even hear a single scream of pain. It was all over in an instant.

Dorothy gives Judas a dumbfounded look, as if she is dreaming.

“Hmm, it seems that suppressing the rest of them will be impossible with just the adventurers that we have employed as guards... There is no other choice, I will lend them a little assistance. Dorothy, activate all of the altars before I return.”

“Fueh? I-I’m sorry?!”

But Judas's voice sounds incredibly real. And the contents of his orders are also very real. They are harsh orders that Dorothy wishes were a lie. But she is the only one other than Judas who understands the processes involving Ancient Magic that are required to activate all of the different kinds of altars, so she has no choice.

"I am leaving it to you."

And Judas who is walking out of the room, still naked, is also definitely real.

"Judas-samaa~! Your clothes! Please put on your cloothes!"

